

Backstabbed in a **Backwater Dungeon**:

My Trusted **Companions** Tried to **Kill** Me, But Thanks to the **Gift** of an

UNLIMITED ∞ **GACHA**

I Got

LVL 9999

Friends and Am Out For **Revenge**

on My **Former** Party Members

and the **World**

VOL.

1

Story
Meikyou Shisui
Illustration
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Chapter 0: The Unlimited Gacha

“Light, we’re kicking you out of the party.”

“Huh?”

I was so dumbfounded by what I’d just heard, that meek response was the best I could manage. The party in question, the Concord of the Tribes, was in the process of battling its way through the Abyss, the largest and toughest dungeon so far discovered in the realm, as well as the most notorious. I’d joined the quest as the party’s baggage carrier and gofer, and we were just in the middle of taking a break in a wide-open cavern to prepare ourselves for tackling the middle layer of the Abyss’s dangerous depths when Drago dropped the bombshell on me that I was being kicked out of the party. I let the rucksack I was carrying drop to the floor as I wiped the cold sweat from my brow.

Drago, the leader of the party, was a dragonute: a half-dragon, half-human that walks upright on two legs. Even though he had the outward appearance of a very scary dragon, he was actually a kind, intelligent, and dependable leader. But it was looking like I’d caused trouble for Drago—and the rest of the party, for that matter—and I hadn’t realized until it was too late that I’d made them all angry with me.

I hurriedly bowed my head in shame and blurted out an apology.

“I-I’m so sorry, Mr. Drago! If you have a problem with me, I’ll be sure to fix it right away! Just please, don’t throw me out of the party!”

“Pfft! Heh heh heh! We ain’t got no actual *problem* wit’cha, kid. We just don’t need ya anymore! We really gotta spell it out for ya?” Garou the wolfman piped up.

“Honestly, I know you’re an inferior race, but I can’t *stand* how stupid you humans are,” Sasha the elf chimed in.

“Hm, is this lack of understanding the result of your own personal ignorance, or is it characteristic of the entire human race? As a researcher, my curiosity is

positively piqued,” Sionne the dark elf mused.

All three of them looked down on me with scorn as I apologized profusely, their words devastating me even more than Drago’s declaration that I was being kicked out of the party.

This realm is made up of nine races: humans, beastfolk, dragonutes, elves, dark elves, dwarves, demonkin, onifolk, and centaurs. Not all races were created equal, however. Humans, for instance, aren’t as strong as beastfolk or onifolk, nor are we as fast as centaurs. We aren’t as magically gifted as dragonutes, elves, or dark elves, nor do we live as long as those races. Humans aren’t as resourceful as dwarves, and we aren’t as clever as demonkin.



Because of this, in this realm, we humans are looked down on, discriminated against, and viewed as the most inferior of the races. In fact, the eight other races often referred to us as “inferiors” as shorthand. The Concord of the Tribes was different, however. The party was famous for rejecting bigotry and recruiting members of all races in an attempt to embrace the lofty aspiration of creating a world where all are equal.

Garou, who looked like a wolf standing on two legs, would yell at any beastfolk who made fun of me when we were walking around town. Sasha, a beautiful elf with pointy ears and blonde hair cascading down her back, would console me whenever this discrimination brought tears to my eyes. Sionne, who had silver hair and tan skin, would help me study, teaching me everything she knew about drug making.

But in that moment, they all seemed like complete strangers to me, belittling me and leering at me as if I were some kind of nasty insect or a pitiful animal they were about to start hunting. This whole situation was shocking to me, and I felt like I’d been whacked around the head with a blunt object out of nowhere.

“Wh-Why would you three—” But before I could finish my question, I was cut off by the four party members who hadn’t spoken yet.

“C’mon, do we really need to spend all day talking about this? We don’t need the kid, so let’s just kill him already. We can’t have another party waltzing in here and seeing us like this.”

That was Naano, a dwarf with a shaggy beard that was tied to a point. He was urging everyone to kill me, acting as if he were merely tossing out a tool he didn’t need anymore. Naano had been the one who’d patiently taught me how to sharpen swords and keep armor maintained at the party’s manor.

“Naano is right. I can barely stand breathing the same air as this *inferior*, so I would prefer it if we brought this to a conclusion soon.”

That was Diablo, a tall, lanky, young demon with pale skin and devil horns growing out of his head. He had been the one who taught me proper table manners and etiquette. Sure, he had a habit of muttering the occasional snide remark directed toward me, but I’d never heard him speak about me with such indignation and murderous intent before.

“Agreed. This is a complete waste of time.”

The next to offer their thoughts on the matter was Oboro, an oni who’d taught me how to fight with my bare hands and melee weapons in his spare time. He wasn’t just a fellow party member to me, he was my mentor—an expert instructor in combat techniques. Yet, with just a few short words, he had dismissed me as a pest.

“Hold your horses. This inferior’s taken up too much of our valuable time to dispose of him quickly. I’d feel *much* better if we made him feel every last ounce of our pain before bumping him off.”

The last to speak up was Santor, a two-legged centaur who was the biggest of all the party members and who seemed to want me to die a slow, gruesome death. He had been the one who’d taught me how to use a bow and arrow and how to hit a moving target.

I turned my gaze once more to the party leader, Drago, and fully aware that my teeth were chattering, I spluttered another question.

“Th-This is a joke, right, Mr. Drago? It’s all an act, isn’t it? A prank at my expense? After all, there’s no reason for you to kill me, is there?”

“Sure there is,” Drago said without missing a beat. “As it happens, we were told to kill you. Just to make sure.”

“You’re killing me j-just to *make sure*?” I said, trembling. “Make sure of what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Light, you know that, unlike most other inferiors, you have a Gift.”

“Uh, yeah. The Unlimited Gacha. But you all know it’s a useless Gift that only produces junk.”

Once in a blue moon in this realm, a human gains what is known as a “Gift” when they turn ten, and I was lucky enough to be one of those humans. But the Gift I attained turned out to be this weird skill called the Unlimited Gacha. All I had to do to use this Gift was summon it up, push a gacha button, and out pops a card. Whatever’s on the card becomes a real-world item, which might seem really neat from the way I’m describing it, but trust me, it isn’t. I’d had this Gift for two years by this point and all I’d ever gotten from it was junk, such as

moldy bread, a single sock with a hole in it, and a broken spoon. Talk about an utterly useless Gift.

“Our superiors initially suspected you were a Master since you possessed this curious Gift called the Unlimited Gacha,” Drago explained. “So we brought you into the party in order to observe your Gift, your temperament, and your actions at close quarters. Unfortunately, your Gift only brought forth rubbish, and your stats remain at the same level as your other inferiors. As such, it has been determined that you are not a Master, and we were given orders from above to dispose of you. They wanted to eliminate any possibility of a calamity that may result from letting you wander around freely.”

I wasn’t following even half of what he’d said! All I’d managed to glean from his explanation was that I wasn’t a Master and I was going to be done away with, just to be on the safe side. Also, what was a “Master,” anyway?

“My nation was disappointed he wasn’t a Master, but it was a huge weight off *my* shoulders,” said Sasha. “If Light had been a Master, they would’ve ordered me to marry an inferior just so the bloodline would be theirs. Ugh, just thinking about it gives me goosebumps.”

“Heh heh heh! The elven nation *would* be disappointed, wouldn’t they?” Garou said. “You elves and dark elves sure do love yer Masters, don’tcha?”

“NNation?” I stuttered. Were these “superiors” Drago mentioned the authorities of a nation? Were Masters highly sought after by a nation? What did Masters do, anyway?

Drago glared at Sasha and Garou, whose faces immediately turned grim as the two of them trembled with fear under his gaze. They knew better than to get on the wrong side of the highest-level member of the party. Naano, Diablo, and Oboro stared incredulously at the loose-lipped pair, while Santor let out a derisive snort. Relations between the beastfolk and the centaurs were every bit as bad as between the elves and dark elves, which likely explained why Santor’s first reaction to Garou’s predicament was to laugh.

“I swear, elves and beastfolk always open their mouths before engaging their brains, don’t they?” said Naano.

“Compared to inferiors, they have silver tongues. Though I think the way

these two speak out of turn is more charming than it is offensive,” Diablo said mirthfully.

“Not so charming if it causes trouble,” Oboro shot back.

“Haw-haw! That’s beastfolk for you!” Santor sneered.

Drago ignored the interjections of the other four and continued lecturing the two troublemakers. “You two need to exercise more discretion. What happens if our secret gets out?”

“F-Forgive me, my leader,” said Sasha. “It was a slip of the tongue.”

“Y-Yeah, sorry. Got a li’l carried away there,” Garou admitted. “Tell ya what: what if the two of us take care of the little puke for you? Then, our secret’ll stay nice and safe, yeah? It’ll be on us.”

“Yes! What a great idea, Garou!” Sasha agreed. “His blood will be on *our* hands!”

“Eek!” I shrieked as Garou jerked his arms out wide and flicked out the steel blades attached to his gauntlets. Sasha unslung her bow and took aim at me. They were really going to kill me!

I started backing away slowly, then turned around and ran for it.

“Aha ha ha!” Garou roared. “This here’s the Abyss, human! Even if ya do manage to get away from us, the monsters’ll finish ya off!”

“Yes, but they won’t get a chance if we kill you first!” Sasha called out as she unleashed an arrow.

“Gaaah!” I screamed in pain as the arrow speared through my left leg, and I fell to the ground, unable to run anymore. It was a really hard landing too, the jarring impact with the rock-littered floor of the cave-like dungeon drawing blood and turning the ground around me red. It was the arrow stuck in my leg that hurt the most, though.

“Ah, nothin’ beats that look on their faces and all that screamin’! I really get a kick outta huntin’ humans for sport! Monsters and animals ain’t half as fun ‘cause they can’t talk!”

“Indeed, Garou,” Sionne agreed, nodding along to the wolfman’s sadistic

remarks. “I enjoy hearing the screams of the inferiors I do my experiments on so much, I can’t help applying even more pressure to them in response. Light’s screams and pained expressions are *especially* delicious.”

Sasha seemed repelled by the dark elf’s words. “Honestly, you dark elves are far too obsessed with experimentation. This is neither the time nor place. Our cover story is *supposed* to be that a monster landed a fatal blow on one of our party members while we were questing in the Abyss, the most dangerous dungeon in the world. But that won’t convince anyone if we take our sweet time over it and another party shows up before we finish the job!”

“Okay, okay, I hear ya. Relax,” Garou replied before turning to me. “Truth is, kid, I wanted to toy wit’cha some more before wastin’ ya. On the other hand, ya did give us all a good laugh by taggin’ along like an idiot with no clue of what we were really up to. So I’ll put ya outta yer misery quick. Call it a ‘thank ya’ gift if ya like.”

As casually as anything, Garou closed in for the kill as I lay there on the ground with an arrow through my leg, slavering, bleeding, and crying from the pain. I was in complete denial of the scene unfolding before my eyes.

“No, no! This can’t be happening! The Concord of the Tribes is supposed to be *good*! You’re all imposters! You *have* to be fakes!”

The fake Drago snapped back with invective of his own. “Nonsense! We dragonutes simply have too much pride to consort with you inferiors on equal terms. I only consented to this charade because I had orders from above.”

“Aha ha ha!” the fake Garou howled with laughter. “Oh, *man*! This is the funniest thing I’ve seen in my life! Yer killin’ me!”

The fake Sasha’s face wrinkled in disgust. “Why are you marveling over this display? I swear, humans are vile, revolting creatures! Why don’t the authorities just eradicate these inferiors once and for all?”

The fake Sionne looked on impassively, as if she were watching a lab rat taking its final breath. “Light could have been very useful as an experimental subject, but alas, it is out of my hands. I suppose I can make up for it by purchasing a few young female inferiors and using them instead.”

The fake Naano—who looked like he’d completely run out of patience—was egging on my killers to hurry up and finish the job. “C’mon, kill him already! This kid’s not a Master. He’s nothing to us! We’re burning daylight as we speak!”

The fake Diablo shrugged in agreement. “Naano is quite correct. We are wasting precious time here. In any event, these inferiors look ghastly when they have lost all hope. Our best option is to kill him at once and leave this dungeon forthwith.”

The fake Oboro chimed in as well, practically whispering as he spoke. “If none of you will kill him, I’ll have the honor.”

The fake Santor bellowed angrily. “Damn it! *I* wanna kill him! Though I *really* want to pay him back for making my life hell first, by torturing him over and over! This is infuriating!”

All the murderous fakes who had the same faces, voices, and mannerisms as the *real* party members were mocking me and laughing at me, but I didn’t want to die, so I tried to get away the best I could. With my leg hurt, however, I couldn’t run, so I crawled along the jagged, rock-littered floor of the cavern—the very act of which ripped open my skin and caused me to bleed even more. I ignored these new wounds and kept moving.

I didn’t want to die, but in the back of my mind, I knew I was a goner. I had a power level of 15, which was high for a twelve-year-old and mostly due to the party helping me to level up, but if you were to ask what the power levels of the other members of the party were, well...

Garou and Santor were both around 150, while Sasha, Sionne, and Naano were all around the 300 mark. Diablo and Oboro were nearer 400, while Drago’s level was up around 500. Humans were way behind the other races when it came to physical strength, magic, and lifespan—to name just a few traits where we were found to be lacking. All of this meant humans had the weakest overall levels of any race, while the others were able to reach much higher levels, thanks to their strength, magic, and longer lives. This sizable gap in levels was the main driving force behind the discrimination humans suffered in this realm, and it was this stark difference in our respective power levels which told me I didn’t have a hope in Hell of getting away from the much

higher-leveled members of the party.

Still, I carried on crawling for my life. Though as I struggled desperately to get away, more bad luck befell me. As my outstretched right hand touched the ground, a huge curtain of light exploded from underneath it.

“Huh? Did he just trigger a teleportation trap?!”

“Don’t let him get away! We have to kill hi—”

In that instant, the sound of everybody’s voices cut off abruptly, and for a moment, all I saw was blinding white light.



“Urgh, I hurt all over.”

Luckily for me, I’d managed to escape from the other party members, but unluckily for me, Sasha’s arrow was still wedged in my left leg and I was still scraped and bloodied from crawling across that rocky cavern floor. A momentary wave of relief washed over me on the realization that I’d made it to safety, though it was almost instantly followed by a second wave of total pain that tore through me without mercy.

It looked like I’d ended up in another cavern in the same dungeon. Unlike the middle layer of the Abyss, this area was much darker. I flopped onto my back on the bare rock beneath me.

“Mom, dad, big brother, Yume,” I mumbled to the air around me. “You were right. The city *is* a scary place. I wanna go home.”

I hurt all over, I had an arrow in my leg, and the party members I’d trusted completely had humiliated me and tried to kill me. I felt crushed by their betrayal, and longed to be back with my family.

I was born the second son of a poor farmer, and with my big brother being the one who would one day take over the family farm, I decided to leave home. My parents and siblings told me I didn’t have to go, but I’d made up my mind. My family would have one less mouth to feed, and there would be more food for my baby sister, Yume. I set out with a plan to make a name for myself in the city, but this was where I’d ended up. I’d be too ashamed to face my family

after what had happened.

But that wasn't important right now. If I didn't make it out of the Abyss, the most dangerous dungeon in the realm, I'd never see sunlight again, let alone reunite with my family.

"Why'd they trick me and try to kill me?" I murmured. "I'm just a poor farm boy. What is a 'Master,' anyway? Why is some nation behind this? I don't want to die—not until I know what's going on. At any rate..."

The lingering respect I felt for my party and my sheer anguish at being betrayed by them gave way to a burning desire for revenge.

"I'll make them *suffer* for what they did to me! I'll kill them all! I can't die here without paying them back! I won't be able to die in peace until I've taken revenge against all those who betrayed me!"

The inferno of vengeance welling up inside me eclipsed the pain coursing through my body. "But if I want my revenge, and to see my family again, I have to somehow stop this bleeding and get out of—"

"Grrrrr..."

The guttural growl that cut me off told me that my bad luck had struck again. A monster appeared out of the shadows in front of me, perhaps drawn by all the noise I was making, or perhaps because it had caught a whiff of my blood. It was a huge creature, maybe ten meters in length, and it walked on all fours. It had a tail that was thicker than my torso and that looked a lot like a snake, even down to having its own two eyes and a mouth. The snake-tail rippled its way through the air toward me. The monster stared at me with keen, menacing eyes as drool oozed from its mouth. Even if this had been an ordinary predator, I would've been done for, but I was in for a real shock when I saw the monster's stats screen.

"What?! Is this some kind of joke? This can't be real!" I cried. "Level 1000?!"

A person or creature can voluntarily activate their stats screens for others to see, which meant, by displaying its stats to me just to rub in how outmatched I was, the monster wasn't just intimidating me *physically*, it was *mentally* tormenting me as well.

I'd had it all wrong. I'd thought the teleportation trap had sent me back to somewhere near the entrance to the middle layer of the Abyss, but it turned out that it had actually transported me to the deepest part of the Abyss—a completely unexplored area that nobody in the world had set foot in. I assumed that had to be the case, because there was no way I'd be face-to-face with a Level 1000 monster otherwise!

"I-I have to get out of here! But where do I go?!"

I was a Level 15 human, so there was absolutely zero way I was escaping from the bottom-most levels of the Abyss. There was nowhere I could run to escape from the monster.

"Grrrrr!"

As if to confirm this, the creature let out another guttural growl and slowly advanced toward me, obviously fully aware of how hopeless my situation was. If the monster reached me, I'd probably suffer a fate worse than death on the wrong end of its carnivorous teeth.

But I wasn't dead yet.

"I'm not going to die without finding out the truth, nor without seeing my family again, nor without getting revenge on the people who betrayed me!" I screamed. "I'm not going to die like some piece of *garbage*!"

Unfortunately, because I'd left the rucksack back with my former party, I didn't have a knife, a canteen, or even a piece of flint on me. The only thing I had was my god-given Gift. I smashed the Unlimited Gacha button repeatedly and prayed feverishly for something that might help me out of this, as my Gift was my one last hope for escaping this hopeless situation.

"Huh?"

"Grrr?"

A large, magical seal that gave off a heavenly light emanated from my core, and the Level 1000 monster—which had been so cocksure up until just a second ago—stopped in its tracks in front of the mysterious brightness.

"Grrr—graaw!"

Whether due to intuition or instinct, the monster charged at me at top speed! Unsurprisingly for a Level 1000 creature, it closed the gap in an instant, and the monster's gaping jaw was soon looming over me.



I guess this is the last thing I'm ever going to see, I thought to myself.

Just as I'd given up all hope, a glow bright enough to illuminate every corner of the deepest part of the Abyss burst forth.

"I shall not take kindly to any creature who bares its fangs at my master, even if the creature in question is a mere pup."

In the light, I could just about make out locks of raven hair fluttering. A moment later, the Level 1000 monster was minus a head and the rest of its body had been sliced and diced, as if the creature had already been carved into chunks from the moment it had wandered onto the scene.

The speaker, who didn't have a single speck of blood on her, stood between me and the dead monster. She had long, jet-black hair tied up into a ponytail and adorned with a long ribbon, and she was wearing a maid's outfit, like the kind you'd see worn by servants in upper-crust households. She was also wearing pristine white gloves and stockings, and even her shoes were spotless.

She was somewhat taller than the average human woman, and long eyelashes framed her large, round eyes, while her rose-colored lips were accentuated by a nose with a straight bridge. All of her features were perfectly proportioned, and her skin was so pale it was nearly translucent. It was as if a divine power had put every last effort into creating an exquisite doll.

Her statuesque face alone would've been more than enough to attract attention, yet she was also very well-endowed, and the considerable chest area of her maid uniform billowed. No man would be able to resist trying to steal a glance at *that* bust. Yet her hips were so narrow, she looked like she might snap in half. Her limbs were long and slender and matched her stature perfectly. In short, she had a truly incredible physique.

She turned to me, and her eyes trembled with pain as they landed on me. She then dropped to one knee, like a knight in the presence of a monarch.

"Forgive me, master. I have taken it upon myself to heal your wounds. I was unable to endure the sight of those injuries to your precious skin and face. I hope you can pardon my presumptuousness."

"Wh-What? Ah! The pain! It's gone?!"

I checked myself over and found that someone or something had pulled the arrow out of my leg. In fact, I wasn't wounded anywhere, and I wasn't in any pain.

"Master, may I ask to hear your name in your mellifluous voice?"

"Huh? Uh, my name?" I said. "My name is Light."

"Master Light, Master Light, Master Light... What a remarkably distinguished name." The woman clasped her hands tightly over her chest while repeating my name. "As is demanded by my honor as a maid, I shall live only to serve you, to devote myself to you, and I am prepared to die for you," she continued. "On my honor as a maid, I swear absolute fealty to you, Master Light, and I pray that you will retain me."

"Uh, yeah..."

"I thank you immeasurably, Master Light. As a bird can never be without its wings, and a tree never without its branches, you shall never be without me by your side, from now until your dying day."

The "yeah" I'd uttered had been more out of confusion than consent, but it felt too awkward to correct her after that.

But never mind all that. Who was she? And what was she doing at the bottom level of the Abyss? What had that huge magical seal been about? When did she heal my wounds? And wouldn't it be a good idea to leave this spot since the ground was drenched in the blood of that monster and the smell of it might attract other creatures?

So many questions swam through my mind, but I was so disoriented that a single word didn't pass my lips. The maid must have noticed my confusion at the situation, since she picked that moment to introduce herself.

"Forgive me for not introducing myself before. I am the Super Ultra Rare card: Level 9999, Ever-Seeking Maid, Mei."

"A Super Ultra Rare card? Level 9999?"

"Correct," said Mei. "I am a Super Ultra Rare card that was brought forth by your Gift, the Unlimited Gacha. As long as I am here, I promise that the hordes

of monsters dwelling in this dungeon shall never lay a single claw on your lovely skin.”

Well, it had taken her less than a second to dispatch that Level 1000 monster, a creature so terrifying it was almost mythical, so I was probably safe with her, but I was still having trouble believing what I was seeing.

“This is impossible. My Unlimited Gacha only ever produced junk items before. It’s never given me someone as amazing as you, Miss Mei. I mean, first of all, are people even meant to come out on gacha pulls?”

“Master Light, you need not call your maid ‘Miss.’ You may simply call me by my given name, Mei.”

Before I was betrayed, it was natural for me to use “Mr.” or “Miss” whenever I was talking to other members of the party. I wasn’t used to calling people by just their first names. “Wait, I can’t—”

“I implore you.”

Her firm voice and sad-looking eyes made it impossible for me to deny her request.

“Okay, M-Mei.”

“I thank you for accepting this humble request from your servant,” said Mei. “Your magnanimity befits you, Master Light, for you possess the magnitude of a ruler. And as such, your Gift, the Unlimited Gacha, should not have produced any failures. If you will allow me, I would like to examine your Gift using my Appraisal.”

“A-Appraisal?” I replied. “Miss—I mean, Mei... You have the Gift of Appraisal?!”

People with Appraisal were able to “assess” the attributes of other people and items, and the higher the level of the one possessing this Gift, the more that would be revealed to them. Among humans, Appraisal was a highly sought-after Gift since it guaranteed you work for life.

“More precisely, it is one of several skills I possess,” said Mei. “May I be allowed to appraise you, Master Light?”

“Uh, sure, go ahead.”

“Then, if you will pardon me. Appraisal!” Mei announced. “Your attributes are concealed in such a way that no one below my power level could have determined them. You continue to amaze me, Master Light. I could hardly have imagined how much power you possess. Your Gift, the Unlimited Gacha, grants you limitless access to gacha cards,” she continued. “The probability of receiving a certain card changes with the amount of mana. Ranked from high to low, you can receive: EX cards, Super Ultra Rare cards, Ultra Rare cards, Super Super Super Rare cards, Super Super Rare cards, Super Rare cards, Rare cards, Normal cards, and Errors.”

“Huh? What does all *that* mean?” This was definitely not something a poor little farm boy like me found easy to get his head around. Mei tried to fill in the blanks for me.

“When a sorcerer casts a spell, that magic uses the mana from the air around them. The Unlimited Gacha appears to produce cards by absorbing that very same mana. However, there is not much mana on the surface world, so the chances of your Gift producing an SUR card like mine were infinitely close to zero. However, because there is much *more* mana in the lowest reaches of this dungeon, the chances of producing an SUR card increased dramatically.”

“Okay, I think I get it,” I replied, having not understood half of what she’d said. The bit I did get was it looked like my Gift could produce cards as powerful as Mei on the bottom level of the Abyss.

“You are certainly astonishing, Master Light,” Mei remarked. “You were unaware of the particulars of the Unlimited Gacha that I have since revealed using my Appraisal, yet you knew enough about your ability to travel to the very bottom of the Abyss and summoned me regardless. You are indeed the perfect master for me to serve and it is my honor as a maid to do so.”

Mei paused, then continued.

“But do you not think it was somewhat *reckless* for you to journey to these depths alone, given your current status?” Mei asked. “From this day forward, I will never leave your side, and I swear on my honor as a maid that you will never come to harm in such a manner again.”

I could only respond with silence.

“Master Light, whatever is the matter?”

“Oh, no, it’s not what you think, Miss—I mean, Mei. I didn’t come to the Abyss by myself.”

I went on to tell Mei the whole story of how I’d gotten my injuries and how I’d found myself at the bottom-most level of the world’s most notorious dungeon, but doing so made me recall how the companions I’d once trusted had betrayed me in such a horrible way, and I was unable to hold back the tears.

Once I was done telling the tale, Mei embraced me tightly, and since she was taller than me, my face ended up being buried in her ample bosom. I’d been so focused on my feelings of despair that I didn’t at any point consider that a beautiful woman like Mei might hug me and smoosh my face in between her breasts. My submerged face, as well as the rest of my body, turned beet red. A scent sweeter than flowers filled my nostrils and made me dizzy with elation as Mei—who hadn’t noticed I was blushing—stroked my head over and over, and did what she could to console me.

“A solitary maid like me could never understand how painful and degrading that was, and how angry you must feel after what you went through, Master Light,” said Mei. “However, you have the means to exact the most appropriate retribution against those who have proven themselves to be lower than animal droppings. Please simply give me the order, and within the hour, I will have the heads of those reprobates lined up before you!”

“No, wait, Mei! You can’t!”

“I understand that you are a gentle soul, Master Light, but I do not believe there is a need to show a shred of mercy to those villains.”

I drew away from Mei’s chest and shook my head.

“No, I’m not saying I want to show them mercy. I just want to grow stronger and take revenge on them *myself*. I also want to find out why a nation would seek out and befriend a so-called ‘Master,’ only to turn around and try to kill him. I guess you don’t think a human like me would be able to do any of that, do you, Mei?”

“On the contrary. What you desire is what I desire, Master Light. If you wish to execute this act of vengeance on your own terms, then on my honor as a maid, I pledge to support you in that endeavor. However it comes to pass, it is my firm belief that you will succeed in having your revenge and uncovering the truth.”

“Thank you, Mei,” I said, after a pause.

“I am humbled by your words,” Mei replied.

I’d been betrayed by a group of friends I’d trusted, but on the upside, it had led to my Unlimited Gacha giving birth to Mei, a woman who swore her undying loyalty to me. My party’s betrayal had angered me so much, it boiled my guts, and I’d felt so hurt by it, I’d wanted to die right there on the spot. But because I’d ended up in the bottom-most level of the Abyss, I’d met Mei, and now, I felt joy welling up from the bottom of my heart.

Mei took out a handkerchief and wiped my tear-stained face. “To my most unbearable shame, I must inform you that I cannot help you fulfill your desires on my own. I ask that you use your Unlimited Gacha to summon other allies like me.”

“What? But you’re *incredibly* powerful. I mean, your power level is 9999,” I responded, flustered by this suggestion. “Why would I need more allies?”

“Indeed. I can tell you upon my honor as a maid that I am powerful enough to single-handedly lay waste to a nation or two with the utmost of ease. If it were simply vengeance you sought, that would not give me even a momentary pause. But in order to uncover the reasons behind your plight, my powers alone will be far from sufficient, and the most likely outcome would be that you never discover the truth.”

“So in other words, you’re saying I can just use my Unlimited Gacha to summon other people like you?”

The way Mei talked made it difficult to understand even half of what she said, but I did catch the part about summoning up more allies using my Unlimited Gacha, so I decided I’d run with that suggestion.

On hearing that I was ready and willing to do this, Mei responded with a

radiant smile.

“Yes, your interpretation is quite correct. You should summon more allies with your Unlimited Gacha and build your own kingdom in this dungeon, Master Light.”

I knew what the words “build your own kingdom” meant on the face of it, but because I couldn’t wrap my head around the concept, I pretended I hadn’t heard her say it. Following Mei’s advice, I began once again to push the button on my Unlimited Gacha in the deepest of the depths of the Abyss, the most notorious dungeon in the realm.



About three years had passed since that fateful day when I was betrayed by the comrades I’d trusted and met Mei at the bottom of the Abyss. What were once dark crags occupying that section of the dungeon had been transformed into a smooth, marble-like hallway. The magical lighting fixtures that lined the corridor shone brightly, chasing away any trace of darkness. As I, Light, walked through the hallway, the fairy maids that were lined up in a row on either side of me bowed their heads in deference. All of these maids were beautiful young girls of varying shapes and sizes, and if any one of them were to go up to the surface world, she would find herself in the middle of a throng of men either trying to court her, solicit her for her hand in marriage, or asking her to marry their sons.

“At ease,” I said.

“Thank you very much, master,” the maids replied, their voices bubbling with joy.

I waved to them impassively as I passed between them, and even though I wasn’t particularly near the maids, the way the stone hallway was constructed and my elevated power level allowed me to listen in on their private conversations.

“I can’t believe Master Light spoke to us! I feel so very lucky!”

“I hope we didn’t use up all our luck today.”

“Ah, Master Light is so handsome. I want to sniff his hair... No! Just a piece of

his clothing would be enough!”

“Are you some kind of pervert?!”

“*You’d* sniff his clothes too if he let you.”

“Of course I would!”

“I’m fine with having nostrils full of his scent, but I’d rather have him stroke my hair.”

“I want him to glance at me with a look of sheer disgust on his face!”

“Now that’s going *too* far!”

My face crinkled upwards slightly into an awkward grin as I listened in on their exchange. The maid walking beside me who I’d chosen to be my bodyguard turned to me, the veins on her forehead pulsating with rage. “Master Light, please give me permission to put an immediate end to the foolish prattling of these fairies.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t bother me. It just shows how devoted they are to me.”

“Forgive me for overstepping,” the maid said, after a pause. The leniency I showed to the fairies caused her pulsating veins to disappear without a trace.

As we continued to walk, we came to the end of the elegantly constructed corridor and entered an untouched wide, open space with dark crags that was more typical of the dungeon I dwelled in. This area served as my training ground, so I hadn’t altered it in any way. Here, I encountered the three people I was searching for. A short, silver-haired vampire girl threw both of her hands in the air and started venting at the girl next to her.

“I thought I toldya I’m *not* stupid! Look, I even know my multiplications! One times one is one, one times two is two, one times three is four—”

“See? You can’t even recite the multiplication table. Making a mistake multiplying by one proves just how unbelievably stupid you are,” said the young girl, who shrugged in resignation at the vampire. Her blonde hair was tied into two long bunches that stretched all the way down her back, and she wore a witch’s hat.

The third girl, who was shorter than the other two, wore a hood with cat ears

that fitted snugly over her head. She was currently meowing like a cat. It's said three women can drive a man crazy with their chatter, but I liked how they livened up the place. It was a lot better than everyone being sullen and bleak all the time.

I had my attendant hold back as I approached the three girls.

"So *this* is where you'd all got to."

Reacting to my voice, the three girls turned toward me, their faces positively glowing.

"Master Light! Didja come to see me? You're so sweet!"

The vampire girl was an SUR card summoned by my Unlimited Gacha: Level 9999, Ancestral Vampire Knight, Nazuna. Her bloodred irises contrasted sharply with her long, silver hair, and even though she was a shortie, her chest was very large indeed. At first blush, she had the look of a beautiful, sheltered heiress, but as soon as she opened her mouth, it was quickly apparent that she was full of life in a way that belied her blue-blooded outward appearance.

Nazuna was a powerful knight who wore a heavy set of armor, though mostly just on her feet, arms, and shoulders. Armed with a broadsword longer than her body, she was capable of going toe-to-toe with any monster she encountered.

"Nazuna, you know full well that Blessed Lord Light would never seek out a graceless pygmy like you," the girl in the witch's hat said, before turning to me. "Blessed Lord, I'm ready to have your holy child any time of the day or night. Come, let us away to the bedroom. A-A-And if we could, I'd greatly appreciate having some time to bathe so I can wash off this little bit of perspiration that seems to have broken out on me..."

The girl blushed, her eyes turning seductively moist as she said this. She was also an SUR card summoned by my Unlimited Gacha: Level 9999, Forbidden Witch, Ellie. She was a master of all sorts of elements of sorcery, from magic and witchcraft to the dark arts and spirit charms.

Aside from her lustrous blonde hair, another thing that was noticeable about Ellie was that she was around 160cm in height, but because she always wore her witch's hat, she looked a lot taller than she actually was. She had a *well-*

developed bust and a decent hourglass figure, while thick, creamy thighs that would catch the eye of any man peeked out through her irregularly-parted skirt. Naturally, her facial features were quite attractive too. Her large, doe-like eyes were so captivating, they seemed to draw you in, body and soul.

She frequently invited me to her sleeping quarters, but she was actually a virgin with no experience in the bedroom. And despite her many solicitations, she was a bashful girl, who was quick to flush with embarrassment. Although her advances flattered me, I always turned her down. I'd rather steer well clear of having a child to look after. At least, not until after I'd fulfilled my objectives. Though, for the record, I was *very* flattered that a gorgeous girl like Ellie liked me.

"Meow."

The third girl of the three mewed as she rubbed her head against me like a cat. Of course, she was also an SUR card brought forth by my Unlimited Gacha: Level 9999, Genius Monster Tamer, Aoyuki. As her name suggested, she had the ability to tame any magical beast, divine creature, cryptid, or rare animal. Aoyuki was the shortest of the three girls, and not only was she in a cat-eared hood, she also wore an extra-large collar around her neck. The collar was secured like a belt, and it was so long that it dangled behind her like a tail. Some people even thought she resembled a cat in her looks and her mannerisms.

Aoyuki was a cute girl with a baby face framed by fanciful blue hair, and unlike the other two, her breasts were much more delicate things. Her arms and legs were skinny, though they were also long compared to her slight stature. She'd often mew and rub her head against me—like she was doing right at that moment—and I found her mannerisms so adorable, I'd always end up stroking her chin as if she were a real cat.

"Mreeow," Aoyuki purred with pleasure.

"I didn't just come here for you, Nazuna. I need to talk to all three of you," I said. "Ellie, you can invite me to your room another time. Aoyuki, I need you to sit up straight and listen—"

From out of the dark recesses, a four-legged monster suddenly appeared and plodded toward us. The beast was at least ten meters in length and had a

snake-tail thicker than my torso. The seemingly sentient tail slithered and wriggled around like a serpent. I'd noticed the monster was lurking there when I came in, but after getting a proper look at it, I realized the creature resembled the brute I'd encountered when I'd first stumbled into the lowest reaches of the Abyss. My body instinctively froze due to the trauma of that encounter. Noticing how scared stiff I was, the three girls fell into formation in readiness to attack the monster, which was called a Snake Hellhound.

"Ya really gonna disrespect my master in front of me like that? I ain't gonna make your death quick, bub!" Nazuna barked as she effortlessly raised her broadsword, the pupils of her eyes stretching out vertically.

"I have spared you creatures out of compassion and because I know your utility, but there is no excuse for this attempt to harm Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said, a strong aura of bloodlust emanating from her as she opened her book of spells. "I must eliminate every last one of your kind from this dungeon and from the surface world, and erase any mention of your species from the annals of history and the literary canon of this land."

"Agreed. This thing has upset my master. It deserves to suffer a fate worse than plunging into the fiery pits of Hell." The eyes of the normally catlike Aoyuki were hidden by the hem of her hood, and dangling down to the ground from her hand was a spiked metal collar attached to a chain. "We must destroy this thing at once," she added, as she assumed a fighting stance.

In the presence of these three menacing Level 9999 fighters, the expression on the Level 1000 Snake Hellhound's face had turned to one of boundless fear. If I were to even jokingly give the three girls the go-ahead, they'd probably eradicate every last Snake Hellhound in this dungeon, before going on to wipe them off the face of the planet. I took some deep breaths to calm my nerves, then turned to the trio.

"I'm fine. Stand down, you three. Can't you see the poor little guy is absolutely terrified? They're actually quite cute once you get used to them."

I approached the Snake Hellhound to pet it, and the creature—realizing that its life was on the line here—rolled over onto its back and let me rub its belly. Its snake-tail wriggled playfully close to me, and I stroked its cold, scaly cheeks.

“Well, if ya say so, Master.”

“I will always follow your instructions, Blessed Lord Light.”

“Mrreow.”

The three girls obediently stood down. With this distraction taken care of, I was finally able to broach the topic at hand.

“I’ve received word from Mei that our target has taken the bait. I came here to tell the three of you to get ready to move.”

I’d been so excited to receive this message from Mei that I’d gone to the effort of relaying the news to the other girls in person, without relying on my power of Telepathy like I usually did.

“Oh! So it’s finally happening! Congrats, Master Light! I’ll make sure I’m ready for this one!” Nazuna said with glee.

“I for one am not pleased that Mei was chosen to be the bait for this mission,” Ellie said. “I could have performed the role perfectly. Or *more* perfectly, I should say.”

“Mew,” Aoyuki added.

“I appreciate your willingness, Ellie,” I replied. “But unfortunately, you don’t *quite* look human. Mei can easily pass for a human, so she was the better choice for this mission.”

The big giveaway that Ellie wasn’t human was her pointed ears. They weren’t quite as sharply pointed as an elf’s, but they stood out enough that she wouldn’t be taken for being human at a glance. Mei, however, looked just like a human maid, even if she was a strikingly attractive one. Of course, if she’d wanted to, Ellie could’ve easily changed her appearance with magic items and the like, but a disguise like that wouldn’t have been one hundred percent foolproof, so we’d decided to go with Mei out of an abundance of caution.

“I do understand that, Blessed Lord. I will, however, remind you that you do have me at your service, not just Mei.”

“Of course. And I’m not just counting on you, Ellie. I need each and every one of you.”

The three girls seemed taken aback by this statement, even to the point of blushing and visibly trembling. I was very glad they were so devoted to me, but sometimes, they'd take it a little *too* far—like at this very moment—and all I could do in those moments was awkwardly chuckle at the display. Despite this rather uncomfortable exchange, I couldn't help but feel invigorated by the prospect of carrying out the first step of my revenge after three long years.



Garou the beastman struck a gallant figure as he strutted down the city's main boulevard, and every person he encountered stepped aside for him. Everyone looked up to Garou and they all scrambled to be the first to pay their respects as he passed.

"Garou! How're you doin' today, boss? Can I ask where you're heading? If you don't mind, I'd like to come with!" shouted one.

"Mister Garou, is there any chance you can meet my little sister later? She's a huge fan of yours," shouted another.

"Pay no heed to these strangers. You should really get to know my daughter."

"Sir Garou, please come visit our parlor and regale us with tales of your legendary exploits," one young beastwoman called. "We'll be waiting!"

"Forget those young waifs," an older-sounding female voice called. "Come to *our* parlor and let some *real* women treat you right. We promise to take *extra* good care of you."

Beastmen young and old as well as beastwomen both nubile and fully mature showered Garou with a flurry of solicitations. Although his tail wagged gleefully at the attention, Garou raised his hands impassively to put a stop to all the commotion.

"Sorry, folks. Gotta take care of some business first. A man like me's got a packed schedule, y'know. But I'll squeeze all of ya in when I'm free. Just sit tight, folks!"

The gathered beastfolk didn't say anything else after that, just collectively gazed at Garou with a mix of reverence, respect, adoration, and a few even with jealousy. Those looks of envy, however, just served to feed into Garou's sense

of superiority.

I'm now the front-runner to become the next chieftain of the wolfmen. And all I had to do was bump off one human brat, Garou thought. Ya couldn't ask for a sweeter deal!

Roughly three years ago, the Concord of the Tribes had roped a boy into their party who they thought could be a Master. They'd spent the next three months monitoring the boy, but in the end, it was determined that the kid didn't have the makings of a Master after all. As such, they'd decided to kill the boy as a precaution, and the party had sought to carry out the deed in a dungeon where there would be no witnesses and where it would be easy to dispose of a body. The party members had gotten a little carried away, however, and allowed the boy to escape. More specifically, they were able to render the boy practically immobile by firing an arrow into one of his legs, but just as Garou was about to end it by slashing him to death, the boy had reached out and accidentally activated a magical teleportation trap. A moment later, the boy had vanished without a trace.

Afterward, the party had searched for the boy as far and wide as they could, but they had been unable to locate him. In any event, it had been clear to them that the boy had been transported somewhere else within the Abyss, the most notorious dungeon in the realm, and what's more, he'd been badly injured at the time, so there had been no doubt in their minds that the stench of the boy's blood would've attracted the kind of monster that would likely eat him alive.

All the members of the Concord of the Tribes had eventually agreed that Light was dead and they'd relayed this news to their superiors. Upon hearing the party members' account of events, the higher-ups also concluded that there was very little chance Light had survived, and declared him deceased.

As a reward for killing off a human who was thought to be a Master, Garou attained a status among his peers that made him the favorite to be the next chieftain of the wolfmen, and all the other wolfmen and beastfolk showed Garou due respect whenever he strolled the city streets. The nation's authorities also showered Garou with enough reward money for him to live a life of luxury for the rest of his days.

I heard the guys who hired us also formed other parties besides us to look for Masters. They're even formin' underground societies through professional guilds to that end, Garou mused. Still don't get what a Master even is, though. Wonder why the nations are going to so much trouble to find a Master.

Garou's reward had been generous indeed. Just a few years before, his social status hadn't been anything special and he'd been in no position to be in the running to take over as the leader of the wolfmen. To put it in simpler terms, it was as if the third son of a farmer had suddenly risen to become the heir apparent of the village chief. Barring any surprises, Garou was a shoo-in to be elected to the position. And Garou wasn't the only one who'd come out ahead. From what he'd heard, everyone else in the Concord of the Tribes had shot up the social ladder in similar ways back in their own homelands.

That elf Sasha was a bastard child, and her half-sisters and her dad's actual wife treated her like the black sheep of the family, Garou thought. Now I hear talk of her marryin' into the royal family. Sionne the dark elf's a high-level researcher, and Naano the dwarf's workin' at the top blacksmithing forge in his kingdom now. Oboro the oni and that musclehead centaur Santor went back to their own nations. The demon Diablo's no longer disowned, and not only was he allowed back into the peerage, he even got himself a higher rank at court.

The party member who had advanced the furthest, however, was Drago the dragonute.

Never knew Drago was a member of the imperial family, Garou mused. No wonder he acted so high 'n' mighty all the time. He did start off pretty much right at the back of the line of potential occupants of the throne, but thanks to rubbin' out one human brat, I hear he's been bumped up real high in the line of succession. He's got a real chance now of being the head honcho of the dragonutes, the most powerful of all the nine races. Talk about makin' it in the world.

Light hadn't even been a Master, yet the former party members were being given the royal treatment, both figuratively and literally.

If Light really had been a Master, would we have been treated even better? Garou wondered. *If we would've, then what the hell is a Master?*

Garou briefly considered doing some independent “research” into what a Master was to satisfy his curiosity as well as his lust for an even greater reward than the one he’d received, but he dismissed the notion almost as soon as it had floated into his head. Just the thought of probing deeper into it caused the smell of death to fill Garou’s nostrils. A wave of goosebumps swept across the skin underneath his fur.

My Instinct is tellin’ me not to mess with this “Master” stuff, whatever it is. And I better listen to my Instinct since I can’t even count the number of times it’s saved my hide.

When he was part of the Concord of the Tribes, Garou had fought monsters in dungeons a number of times, and each time, his animalistic Instinct had protected him from danger. Garou’s Instinctual Perception was one thing about him that had impressed the other members of the party.

There’s no point needlessly tossin’ my life away, thought Garou. I’d lose too much if I gamble what I’ve got now just to get more. I used to be an orphan who was only good at fightin’. Now I’m the leadin’ candidate to become the next chief of the wolfmen. And if things go my way... Heh heh heh! I’ll be the top wolfman! To keep my status, I need to forget all about those “Masters” once and for all!

The royal treatment that had been granted to the people responsible for Light’s death even though he wasn’t a Master came with an implied message: you’ve been given what you wanted, so don’t involve yourself any further in the matter. Viewed in that light, there was absolutely no reason for Garou to toss away his elevated social standing just to satisfy his curiosity. Forgetting about these so-called “Masters” was the right course of action.

“Hello. Might I have a word with you?”

“Huh?” It was a disagreeable grunt that passed Garou’s lips because whoever had said this to him had interrupted his thoughts just as he’d made the decision to forget all about Masters, but when he saw the human woman standing before him, his irritation vanished instantly. She had jet-black hair tied into a ponytail, and wore an elegant cloak over finely-tailored traveling garments. She was tall for a human woman, and she had large eyes, rose-colored lips, and a

straight nose, all of which were well-proportioned on her pale face with its limpid skin. In short, she looked like a doll that had been meticulously crafted by a god.

Her face alone was more than enough to turn heads, but she was also so well-endowed, her chest jutted out prominently beneath her clothes—a sight that would've caused any man to stare in wonder at her. At the same time, her hips were so narrow, she seemed in danger of snapping clean in half. Her lithe arms and legs matched her stature, giving her the perfect figure. And this gorgeous human was calling out to Garou. In fact, she was so beautiful, it was doubtful whether she was actually human.

“Forgive me for interrupting you in your day. If I am not mistaken, you are Sir Garou, formerly of the Concord of the Tribes, yes?”

“Uh, yeah. Um...”

Even though the Concord of the Tribes had disbanded, Garou hadn't changed his name, so it had been a piece of cake to find him. The official reason for the party being disbanded had been that it was the members' way of taking accountability for allowing a human under their protection to perish in the dungeon.

“I am searching for the whereabouts of Light, the young master I am sworn to serve,” the woman said with a forlorn look on her face. “Oh, forgive me, I have yet to formally introduce myself. I am Mei, a maid who has sworn absolute fealty to Light.”

“Uh... Ah... Oh?” Garou could only jabber incomprehensibly at the woman's sudden questions and introduction.



Mei went on to tell Garou that Light wasn't *actually* the second son of a poor farmer at all. He was, in fact, the son of blue-blooded aristocrats, though she wasn't at liberty to name them. Due to circumstances out of his control, Light was compelled to live with a family of farmers, according to Mei, and after years of separation, she was finally free to reunite with Light. Trouble was, she didn't know whether he was dead or alive.

Mei had heard that the last time Light had been seen, he had been a member of the Concord of the Tribes, but it had taken her a long time to track down this party that had already disbanded. Mei told the wolfman that she'd lost all hope of ever seeing Light again, but she still wanted to know about his final moments with the Concord of the Tribes. She then came out with a request. She wanted to know if it was at all possible for him to take her to the location where the party had last seen Light alive. Just for guiding her to that spot, Mei was willing to pay the beastman handsomely—a sum large enough to build a modest-sized house. The proposal made Garou perform a wild, happy jig in his head.

These inferiors are dumber'n rocks, thought Garou. Who pays that kinda moolah just to see where some little brat kicked the bucket? But what the hell. I can grab this Mei chick, have some fun with her, then sell her to a slave trader and make even more dough!

Garou's mind snagged on something. *But hold on a sec. I thought the party and the authorities did a thorough background check on Light when they were tryin' to figure out if the kid was really a Master. We looked into absolutely everything, like where he was born and all of that junk, so how come we didn't find this classy babe then? This stinks, I tell ya. Buuut there's still a non-zero chance this broad's the real deal. Or maybe she's lookin' for a different kid entirely. Whatever the case, I can't afford to let this chance pass me by.*

Garou had his doubts about the whole thing, but pressing his hand over his shirt pocket—where he kept his secret weapon—reassured him slightly. He'd had this particular trump card in his possession since before he joined the Concord of the Tribes, and Garou knew he could escape from most situations as long as he had it close to hand.

In spite of his qualms, Garou was inclined to help Mei for the price she'd suggested. But the truth of the matter was it'd be too much trouble for Garou to escort this woman to the middle layer of the Abyss alone. After all, humans were useless low-level deadweights that'd only slow down an adventurer. And it wasn't like Garou was exactly desperate for money either. In the end, Garou decided he'd get some loyal, young wolfmen to join him on the journey as a way of boosting his reputation. He didn't mind sharing the spoils of the venture too much because his real objective wasn't Mei's money, but to engage in

carnal pleasure with her. For Garou to have his way with Mei, he needed a place where they would be unseen by the eyes of others, and a dungeon fit the bill perfectly.

Inferiors are too stupid to know how these things play out, Garou thought. This country shoulda wiped out all of these weaklings long ago. Well, at least I'll get to have a good time outta this.

And so, Garou went along with Mei's request, the two of them agreeing on a departure time, the itinerary, and other details of the undertaking. Garou's plea for assistance was answered practically immediately, and because Garou was the front-runner to become the next chieftain, it wasn't just fellow wolfmen who responded to the call—plenty of other beastfolk did too. They gathered like ants to honey, lured by the prospect of being recognized and rewarded by this future bigwig. As a result, it took longer to choose members for the party than it did to hash out the particulars with Mei. Garou ultimately selected ten young wolfmen, their power levels all hovering around the 150 mark.

By the end of the process, the traveling party—when Garou and Mei were counted—numbered twelve. Compared to the other races that had been in the Concord of the Tribes, the power levels of the beastfolk weren't particularly high, so they needed to compensate for that with greater numbers. On top of that, beastfolk were better at fighting in groups than alone, though admittedly, a lot of that depended on the particular beast tribe they were a part of. Due to their superior sense of smell, the party managed to find their way to the middle layer of the Abyss without needing to fight a single monster.

"So this is where my Light was..." Mei said when they entered the cavern.

"Yeah. Some monster pulled a sneak attack on Light and injured him bad. Then the unlucky kid triggered a teleportation trap and disappeared before our eyes," Garou told her.

Mei put her hand over her mouth, and to anyone looking at her, she appeared unbearably crestfallen. Her jet-black ponytail swayed like a doleful dog that knew it would never see its master again. While Garou was feeding Mei this made-up story, he cast a glance around at the young wolfmen, who were all in on his little scheme. Without making a sound, they positioned

themselves between Mei and the entrance of the cavern to prevent her from escaping.

The site leading to the middle layer of the Abyss resembled a spacious, rock-filled reception hall, and it was frequently used as a rest area by adventurers. There was one entrance to the cavern, which meant there was only a single access point you had to watch in case of approaching enemy monsters. The high ceiling and wide, cavernous space made the location the ideal resting place. Standing between Mei and the exit meant she had nowhere to run. Though, neither did the wolfmen.

Mei was lost in mourning, seemingly unaware of what the rest of the party was up to. *Man, these inferiors are just too easy to get one over on*, Garou thought while outwardly keeping up the sympathy act.

“It just all happened so fast, y’know? We couldn’t get to him in time, and I don’t think he would’ve survived long with those wounds. Sorry I couldn’t do nothin’ to protect him.”

“It truly rends my heart when I think about how he was brought to this dark, filthy place simply to be ridiculed and betrayed by such hateful people,” Mei said. “If only I had possessed the power to attend to him sooner, he would never have met such a deplorable fate. There are no words to express my shame.”

“Huh?”

Mei had paid absolutely no heed to Garou’s attempts at consolation, and the tears she had shed up until this point had solely been over the act of betrayal by the Concord of the Tribes three years prior. It took a few seconds for Garou’s brain to catch up with what his ears had just heard, but when it did, he slowly started backing away from Mei. The other wolfmen sensed something was amiss when they saw the change in Garou’s demeanor.

When he was a good distance away, Garou barked, “Who are ya? Who sent’cha to me?”

Only a small handful of people had known about the plan to kill Light after the whole “potential Master” debacle, though of course, that hadn’t gone quite to plan as Light had managed to escape the fate planned for him by tripping that

teleportation trap. Mei seemed to be human, sure, but humans were known to work as spies for other races. As the old saying goes, nations have no friends, only interests. Garou figured Mei must have been sent by one of the other races to ensnare him and the other wolfmen in here.

Mei, who hadn't listened to a single one of Garou's insincere condolences, reacted to the questions he'd barked in her direction. The hand she'd been holding in front of her mouth lowered and she slowly turned toward Garou and his gang. Her eyes glinted with an anger that could be seen clearly by those gathered in the cavern even though it was dark in there.

"I have made myself very clear that I only serve Master Light. If you see fit to heap scorn upon my honor as a maid, I shall disembowel you and present your innards to you."

Garou let out a surprised grunt as his fur—and that of his associates—stood on end. The beastmen, whose senses and fighting capabilities far surpassed those of humans, were completely overwhelmed by the intimidating energy Mei was giving off. It felt like they'd all been treading water in the ocean, and then all of a sudden, a huge sea monster had appeared right underneath their paddling feet.

Th-This human bitch was meant to be easy prey! thought Garou. I was supposed to pounce on this inferior in this here dungeon, have all kinds of fun with her, then sell her to a slave trader and make even more dough off her! So why am I cowering in fear, I-like I'm standing in front of a hellbeast covered in flames?

Finding themselves in what appeared to be a very grave situation, Garou's band of beastmen started screaming and casting aspersions.

"M-Mr. Garou, what's g-going on here?" cried one.

"Hey, boss, I thought you said this was gonna be a sweet job! Did you trick us or something?" yelled another.

"Are you gonna kill us all here, erase your identity, and switch your allegiance to another race?"

"Is this some kind of joke?! Are you going to betray us?!"

The young beastmen were so shaken by Mei's consummate intensity that they were even beginning to doubt Garou, the one who'd recruited them for this adventure. And it was a serious charge they were leveling at him. Cherishing your comrades was seen as a core value for beastfolk, because without them, they wouldn't be able to hunt or kill monsters to raise their power levels. As such, anyone found to have betrayed their comrades ended up being subjected to severe retribution as an example to others. The punishments meted out were often so ghastly, death was the more preferable option.

"Y-Ya dumb whelps!" Garou yelled, turning to berate his lackeys. "Y'know I'm runnin' to be the next chief of the wolfmen! Why the *hell* would I give up on that title and skedaddle to another nation? Use what little brains ya got, ya stupid pinheads! If ya turn on me, this sweet deal is gonna become a mighty painful one when we get back—"

The barrage of threats and insults Garou was bellowing at his doubters suddenly stopped mid-flow as an unexpected sight robbed him of his words. Stepping out of the darkness from behind the group, the boy who was supposed to be dead strolled nonchalantly onto the scene.

"Mei, don't do anything to them yet. Especially Garou. He's mine."

With a start, the other beastmen turned around to face the owner of the voice. He was wearing a black hood and was holding what looked like a sorcerer's staff in his hand. Due to his short stature, and judging by his voice, they guessed the stranger must have been around twelve or thirteen years old. The beastmen's keen noses instantly told them that this boy was human, but this revelation only raised more questions, chief among them being: *Even taking into account Mei's overwhelming energy, why weren't we able to sniff out this human kid in the middle layer of the Abyss?*

The boy's arrival on the scene had caused the energy emanating from Mei to vanish as if it had never been there. As soon as Mei heard the boy's voice, her expression changed to one you'd be more likely to see on the face of a lovestruck maiden. The boy lowered his hood and breezily raised his hands in Mei's direction. The face of a human boy appeared from under the hood, confirming that the stranger was indeed human. His glossy hair was neatly trimmed, and he had large eyes framed by eyelashes long enough to cast a

shadow. His youthful skin was a healthy milky color, and his lips were rose-colored. In fact, everything about his appearance made it quite likely for him to be mistaken for a cute girl. In a nutshell, he was the type of boy who would easily attract a host of women.

Garou had been rooted to the spot, frozen in shock, long before the boy had lowered his hood.

“N-No way... This has gotta be a joke! Yer tellin’ me yer still *alive*, Light?”

“Garou, it’s been three years, but I’m here for my revenge,” Light said with a smile, as if he were meeting an old friend he hadn’t seen in a while.

An astonished Garou just stood there as Light—the boy thought to be dead, and the last person Garou ever imagined meeting in this dungeon—addressed him, but it didn’t take long for Garou to come to his senses and find his voice again.

“Never thought ya’d survive yer li’l ordeal. Heh heh heh. And yer here for *revenge*, ya say? Ya think an inferior runt that’s only around Level 15 is gonna get revenge on *me*?! Aha ha ha! Man, ya lousy humans are so *stupid*!”



Only a few minutes earlier, Garou had been shaking like a leaf out of fear in front of Mei, but following this new development, he was laughing it up as if he'd been rewarded with a pot of gold, a lavish dinner, and his pick of beautiful ladies all at once. Once he'd recovered from his fit of laughter, an evil expression similar to the one he'd had when he'd first betrayed Light appeared on his face.

"I dunno how ya managed to make it outta that whole ordeal before, but here ya are, showin' up on a silver platter! Now I can kill ya for real and take yer corpse back as proof that ya really are dead! The dragonutes will *hafta* owe us beastfolk a favor after that! This is huge! Historic, even! Forget bein' the top candidate for the position—they'll waste no time in makin' me chief of the wolfmen after this!"

As Garou reveled in his lofty ambitions, Light sighed with disappointment. "As usual, you don't think things through. Any normal person's first thought would be about *how* I managed to survive down here, which would then lead on to other, more relevant questions, like what the connection is between Mei and me."

"Ha! Yeah, yer right about the creepy chick. I dunno her true powers, but I got numbers on my side, kid! Me and the boys'll just overpower the both of ya! Ya really think us beastmen're gonna lose to a couple of stinkin' *inferiors*?"

Garou's comeback was punctuated with a snort, making it clear he was looking down on humans like he always had.

"And besides, we did a background check on ya, so I know everythin' there is to know about ya, all the way down to the number of freckles on yer ass! We know yer just a nobody with a weird little Gift. I bet yer only still alive 'cause Creepy Girl here just happened to show up in the nick of time to save yer freckly ass!"

"I suppose you're right there." Light felt under no obligation to tell Garou the whole truth about his Unlimited Gacha, though his perfunctory remark only succeeded in making Garou even more confident in himself.

"Me and the boys'll have no trouble takin' care of the chick who saved ya. Still think ya can pull off yer little act of revenge? Ha! Think again! Yer too dumb to

know how outmatched ya are!”

On finishing his scornful monologue, Garou sucked his teeth impatiently at his motionless crew, who hadn’t really been able to stay on top of the developing situation.

“Tch, why’re all of ya just standin’ around like dopes?! Don’tcha see what we got here? We can kill this boy and take his dead body to the dragonutes. If we do that, they’ll owe us one! That alone’ll *guarantee* me becoming the next chieftain! If ya boys want in on the sweetest deal of yer lives, ya better block the damn exit, ya stupid mutts!”

The crew jumped at Garou’s words. Of course, this was partly because their leader had just given them an order and they were frantically attempting to carry it out, but it was more than just that. The idea of the dragonutes owing the beastfolk a favor gave them extra motivation to get it done quickly. The dragonutes were the most powerful of all the nine races, and having them indebted to you was a monumentally big deal.

“Y-You got it, boss! We’ll keep these two caged in! Hey, guys! Get around behind ’em!” one shouted.

“On it! C’mon, let’s go!”

“Gotcha! We’re sticking with you always, chief! Luck’s finally on our side!”

Two wolfmen used their powerful legs to leap past Light so they could block the exit, but before they made it there, their heads flew off and rolled along the ground as if they’d been ripped off mannequins. Like headless chickens, the two decapitated bodies continued running until they both slammed into the wall and slumped to the ground, fountains of blood gushing from their necks as their limbs twitched. A heavy stench of blood filled the cavern.

“No one shall be allowed to maneuver themselves behind us,” Mei stated firmly.

The other wolfmen looked on in horror, startled by what they’d just seen. Mei had somehow relocated herself from behind them to Light’s side without anybody noticing, and judging by her words, it appeared that she had been the one who’d beheaded the two wolfmen, though Garou’s gang had absolutely no

clue how she'd done it. All they'd witnessed was two heads suddenly detaching themselves from their owners. What's more, Mei had ripped off her cloak by this point, revealing that she had at some point changed into a smart maid's uniform that didn't have a single wrinkle on it.

As Garou's crew stared at the two of them utterly agog, Light coolly praised Mei as if he'd expected nothing less from her.

"Thank you, Mei. Continue to cover the exit so that none of them escape."

"Understood, Master Light. On my honor as a maid, I shall carry out your command without fail."

Mei bowed deeply and moved back to cover the exit as Light turned to face Garou and his gang again. Both Light and Mei now stood between the wolfmen and the exit. Usually they'd look down on "inferiors" who crossed their paths, but all the beastmen in the cavern were disturbed by the power Mei had unleashed, and were even more shaken by the overwhelming air of confidence Light was exuding. That is, all of them except Garou, who was bellowing at his crew, his face crimson with anger.

"Calm down, ya idiots! I ain't got a clue how they killed our brothers, but it was just a sneak attack! If we stay sharp, we ain't gonna lose to these damn inferiors!"

"Unbelievable," said Light. "I can't fathom how you can still look down on me like this after three long years. Hasn't it occurred to you even once that you guys might be the weaker ones here?"

"Go to hell! There's no way we'd lose to some lousy, low-level human!" Garou barked, and the other beastmen concurred with his declaration of defiance.

Of course, there was a reason the other races looked down on humans. Dwarves, for instance, were able to reach much higher power levels because not only were they hardy, they also had the dexterity to forge powerful weapons and armor. Onifolk had strong physiques, while elves and dark elves excelled in magic, meaning those three races were also able to level up easily. Dragonutes and demons possessed superior physical strength, magical abilities, and stamina, and both races enjoyed extended lifespans. Beastfolk and centaurs didn't possess much in the way of magical abilities, and their lifespans

were on a par with humans, but compared to the race they considered inferior to them, they were both many times stronger, faster, and more resilient. Both races were also strong in group battles, and they had sharp enough senses that they could sniff out prey, which meant they had few problems reaching reasonably high levels.

Humans, on the other hand, struggled to raise their power levels. Humans were very weak compared to the other races, and only a rare few ever exhibited any magical ability whatsoever. On top of that, their bodies were fragile and weak, and their lifespans were short. All of these factors contributed to humans having significantly lower power levels than the other eight races, who treated humans with contempt because they were demonstrably weaker. This goes some way to explaining why Garou and his crew were so confident they would be able to overpower Light and Mei. They figured there was no way two humans could be stronger than a pack of wolfmen.

“Yer outta yer depth, human! We’ll show ya inferiors who the weak ones here are! Follow my lead, boys!”

Garou extended the same steel claws from his gauntlets that had nearly cut down Light three years prior and started running toward him. The others joined the charge just a few steps behind Garou. When it came to team coordination in a fight, there were no better races at it than the beastmen, aside from perhaps the centaurs. Despite the impromptu nature of the attack, Garou’s cobbled-together crew worked together in a way that topped even a well-trained, seasoned party of human fighters.

“Drop dead, ya cocky inferiors!”

Claws, kicks, swords, short spears, and knives flew toward Light from all directions, but he didn’t move an inch from where he was standing, and simply deflected everything with his staff before delivering a blow of his own to each and every one of the beastmen, sending them flying backwards through the air in a chorus of screams of pain.

The various yelps that escaped the lips of Garou’s now utterly defeated gang sounded a lot like the noises pigs make when they get kicked in their midsections. With a look of sheer boredom on his face, Light surveyed the pack.

All of them were either crawling around on the ground in pain, writhing in agony where they lay, or struggling to stop themselves from retching.

“What’s wrong? Is that all you’ve got?”

Those two short questions cut Garou to the quick. He lay flat on his back, his hands pressed firmly against his belly, which had taken the brunt of the blow from Light’s staff. The capillaries in Garou’s eyes were engorged with blood.

“Y-Ya lousy inferior! Ya lousy, *stinkin’* inferior! Yer not better than me! I’m runnin’ to be the next chieftain of the wolfmen! Inferior vermin like *you* will never be better’n me, dammit! Ya shoulda killed me while ya had the chance, human! That li’l slip-up’s gonna cost ya yer life!”

Garou took his hand off his belly, reached into his shirt pocket, and took out his secret weapon: an egg-like sphere.

“I dunno what kinda trick ya pulled back there, but don’t go gettin’ full of yerself just ’cause ya got a li’l stronger!” Garou shouted. “I’ll wipe that hopeful look off yer face soon enough! Come forth, Fenrir!”

The instant the final word had passed his lips, Garou threw the magical sphere—a Beast Orb—to the ground, shattering it into tiny pieces. Beast Orbs are magic items occasionally found in ruins and dungeons that have high-level monsters sealed away inside of them, and anyone who breaks one is able to summon and command the magical beast within—though it disappears again after about an hour. Top adventurers often carried around a Beast Orb in case of emergencies, like the one Garou was experiencing right at that moment. Of course, Beast Orbs didn’t come cheap—you’d be hard-pressed to get one for anything less than the price of a small mansion—but when it came to surviving life-or-death situations, it was worth the expense.

On breaking the Beast Orb, a massive creature with pale blue fur measuring about seven meters in length appeared in front of Garou. The creature snarled threateningly at Light and Mei as Garou roared with laughter, the expression on his face indicating he was absolutely certain that this summoning had just sealed his victory.

“Aha ha ha! Say hello to Fenrir, my Level 500 beast! I always keep this secret weapon on me in case of emergencies! Ya shoulda killed me when ya had the

chance, kid! Now yer luck's run out!" Garou roared.

The other beastmen, who were all still licking their wounds from the beatdown Light had given them, got rather animated at the arrival of Fenrir.

"So beautiful! So powerful!" one commented.

"It really shows you were in the number one party of top adventurers, boss! Should've known you'd have a trump card like that up your sleeve!" said another.

"Praise mighty Garou!"

The wolfmen all looked upon Fenrir with reverence, as if they were young fans meeting their favorite thespian. Light sighed at the beastmen's foolish display.

"Level 500," he said, unimpressed. "That's seriously your secret weapon? It's pathetically weak."

"Aha ha ha!" Garou howled. "Ya think Level 500 is *weak*? Fenrir musta *really* scared ya stupid! What ya did to all of us earlier can only have been some kinda trick—some magic item or power or somethin'—but this baby's a *real* Level 500 beast! Yer li'l parlor tricks are no match for that! It'll smash ya to smithereens! Now get down on the ground and beg for yer life! If ya make me laugh good and hard, maybe I'll let ya live! C'mon, human, do it!"

Of course, Garou had absolutely no intention of sparing Light's life, no matter what the boy did. The other wolfmen, who all had knowing grins on their faces, leered at Light with contemptuous anticipation. Light's response was yet another exasperated sigh. Not only did Light *not* get down on the ground to beg for his life, he started taunting Garou and goading the wolfman to attack him.

"So a Level 500 beast is your secret weapon, huh? All right, tell you what—I won't move from this spot, so take your best shot."

Light's attempts at provocation were underlined by him spreading his arms wide. Anyone looking at him could see that he didn't intend to move an inch from where he was standing. Garou flew into a fit of red-faced rage at Light's cocky attitude.

“All right, ya asked for it! There ain’t gonna be a single one of yer bones left once I’m done wit’cha! Go, Fenrir! Hit ’im with your Howling Beast Blast!”

Whoever smashes a Beast Orb is instantly recognized by the creature inside as its master, and as such, they are bestowed with full knowledge of the creature’s level, characteristics, and special moves. With all that data at his disposal, Garou wasted no time in ordering Fenrir to unleash its most devastating attack: the Howling Beast Blast.

Fenrir roared as its jaws opened as wide as they could go before firing off a beam of pure concentrated pale-blue mana. The giant beast was able to release the entirety of its Level 500 powers in one single burst, and even someone of a similar power level would be instantly vaporized if the blast found its target.

“You know...” Light said nonchalantly as the smoke cleared. “Guys like you always make such a big deal over attacks that only succeed in kicking up a little bit of dust. This is starting to get a tad awkward now.”

“I-Impossible... He ain’t got a single scratch on him?”

Light had been hit with the full force of the Howling Beast Blast, but his hair and clothes weren’t even singed. There was no piece of protection or magical item that could’ve shielded someone from the sheer power of that attack, so for Light to still be standing there completely unscathed, it could only mean that, at minimum, he was vastly overpowered compared to Fenrir.

Garou stared at Light, completely dumbfounded by what he’d just witnessed. The rest of his crew—who had been showering Fenrir with adulation only moments before—did likewise. Light took the collective shock and utter bewilderment of the beastmen in his stride and treated them all to a jovial smile.

“I guess that means it’s my turn now,” he said as he reached into his own chest pocket like Garou had done and drew out a card.

“I feel sorry for that mangy mutt, getting mistaken for Fenrir by you guys. Tell you what—I’ll do you all a favor and show you the real deal. UR Card: Level 9000, Primal God Wolf, Fenrir. Release!”

As soon as the command passed Light’s lips, the card began to glow and light

filled the room. After a few moments, the light diminished to reveal a gigantic fifteen meter long beast with snow-white fur baring fangs that looked monstrously powerful. You could tell just by looking that Light had indeed released the *real* Fenrir. Pitted against the Level 9000 beast, the Level 500 Fenrir was no more than a flea-bitten pup.

Light's next command was slightly more high-pitched, in a voice more befitting of a young kid. "Primal Fenrir, kill that mutt."

The God Wolf Fenrir uttered a submissive bark in response to its owner's command, raised a paw in the direction of the fake Fenrir, and encased the smaller wolf in ice. Cracks formed in the frozen block containing the beast before shattering into tiny shards, which then proceeded to disappear altogether, leaving not even a single hair of the creature behind. It was as if the Level 500 Fenrir had never existed.

"Great job! Good boy!" Light said.

"Arf! Arf!" came the reply.

The God Wolf Fenrir's reward was being petted and stroked like a common house pet, which the holy beast seemed to enjoy immensely, for its tail wagged with joy and it nuzzled up to Light. Meanwhile, Mei silently watched on from a distance, the look on her face betraying how envious she was of the attention the creature was getting.

Garou's crew, on the other hand, were anything but silent as they fell backwards onto their rears to a chorus of yelps, gasps, and barely comprehensible babbling, the life draining from their limbs. Even Garou slumped down onto his backside, fear sapping his strength, and at a complete loss to explain the situation that had just unfolded in front of him.

"Y-Ya trained that behemoth to wipe out my Level 500 Fenrir in the blink of an eye?" he said, dumbfounded.

"Well, I didn't really *need* to summon the God Wolf Fenrir. I could've easily killed that thing myself. I *am* Level 9999, after all."

"What?"

"I'm Level 9999." Light activated his stats screen for Garou to see, and the

wolfmen in the cavern suddenly went several shades paler. Light turned to Garou's crew with the intention of obliterating what little hope they had left. "Oh, and it's not just me. Mei's the same power level. Mei, if you would."

Mei silently turned on her stats screen at Light's request, and true enough, it displayed "Level 9999" too. The beastmen looked absolutely beaten and started grumbling about their defeat.

"L-Level 9999?" one said.

"Is that even possible?" questioned another.

"I thought the highest humans could get was Level 100!"

"There's definitely no way we're winning this, is there?"

The wolfmen were forced to face the truth of the situation they found themselves in: Light was so powerful, not only could he summon the God Wolf Fenrir, he cuddled it and treated it like a pet. And this was a beast that was able to erase the Level 500 Fenrir from existence in an instant with an attack that had caused Garou to keel over backwards and rendered him powerless to get back to his feet. Seeing as how Light was the only one able to control the God Wolf Fenrir, there seemed to be no reason for anyone in the cavern to doubt his words.

Garou eyed Light, the wolfman's pale face covered in greasy flop sweat. *Why didn't I notice it before?* he thought. *Light ain't aged a day even though it's been three years. Why's it taken me this long to notice?*

The last time Garou had seen Light, he'd been a 12-year-old boy freshly plucked from a farming community. Three years had passed since then, so by all rights, Light *should've* been 15. Between the ages of 12 and 15, human boys were *supposed* to go through puberty, which meant a growth spurt, and getting a more prominent Adam's apple, as well as some other noticeably masculine facial features. Yet Light hadn't changed at all. He was the exact same kid Garou had left for dead three years prior. So the burning question was: how in the world had this frankly inconceivable phenomenon come about?

He prob'ly ain't just a dumb kid bluffin' about havin' Level 9999 powers. And if ya look at it like that, it makes perfect sense that he could stop himself agin' and

train the God Wolf Fenrir to be as powerful as that. Which means Light really has become a Level 9999 freak of nature...

In reality, Light was able to retain his youthful complexion due to his Unlimited Gacha, which on one pull had produced a legendary artifact known as the Bracelet of Youth. Light wore this UR item so that he would continue to look 12 years old, and thus ensure that he never forgot the despair, pain, and anger of being betrayed.

As Garou was silently coming to terms with the fact that what Light was telling him was the truth, the tails of the other beastmen curled in submission and they looked over at Garou in the belief that he was their last lifeline.

“B-Boss...”

“What’s the plan, Garou, sir?”

“What do we do now, Mr. Garou?”

The young wolfmen—who’d followed Garou to the Abyss because they’d been promised a “sweet deal”—were looking to their leader to tell them what to do next in order to save their lives. However, their leader, who was now paler than a court jester in heavy makeup, was in the process of prostrating himself on the ground.

“Forgive me for all the insults I hurled and any offense I mighta caused ya...” Garou paused, realizing his usual diction didn’t sound deferential enough. “...caused *you*, Lord Light. I had orders from above to deceive you! It was never my intention to harm you, believe me! So please! I beg your forgiveness! I don’t care what you do to the others, just please spare my life! I implore you!”

“Garou? B-Boss? Are you betraying us?” one of the wolfmen piped up, aghast.

“Y-You cowardly rat!” yelled a second beastman. “Don’t you feel any shame, double-crossing us like this?!”

“Shaddap! I’m not like *you*, ya louses! Yes, I know I betrayed my lord, but I used to look after him when we were out around town! Isn’t that right, Lord Light?” Garou said, attempting to flatter Light with a fawning smile while rubbing his hands together—a complete one-eighty from his earlier attitude. “I treated you to meat skewers from food stalls and bought you fruit juice. I’m

sure you remember how I used to threaten and drive away those idiots who called you names and treated you like dirt, right? Don't you? We had a lot of good memories together, and I did a number of favors for you too. So I don't think it's *too* much to ask for you to spare my life!"

Light looked down at Garou in silence as the wolfman meekly kowtowed for his life. At the same time, the other beastmen carried on jeering at Garou over his craven attempts to save his own skin. After the ear-splitting din had been going on for a while, Light held up a hand and put an abrupt end to the ugly taunting. A deep hush swept across the cavern, which suddenly had the feel of a graveyard in the dead of night.

Light continued to look down at Garou. "Before we get into whether or not I spare you, there's one thing I want to know. What is this 'Master' you were all talking about back then?"

"I-I don't know," Garou babbled. "The higher-ups just told me to look for one, a-and—"

"Why were the authorities looking for a Master?" Light cut in.

"I don't know."

"Why did the authorities decide to have me killed when they found out I *wasn't* a Master?"

"I-I-I don't know," Garou stuttered.

Light's eyes went a shade colder as a brief silence descended on the cavern, prompting Garou to launch into a furious defense of his actions.

"I-I mean it! I really don't know! All they told me was to look for a 'Master'! That's it! This is just my hunch, but I don't reckon the beastmen chieftains know much about it either." Garou paused momentarily before continuing. "I-I mean, look at us! We may have greater physical strength than humans... O-Or at least, a lot of folk say that. I don't *necessarily* agree... But we're still inferior to the other races when it comes to our lifespans, power levels, and abilities. They all just see us as pawns who are barely more useful to them than humans. That's why they didn't tell us more than we needed to know, and I don't think our chieftains know much about it either."

Light turned to the other beastmen. “Do you guys know anything about Masters?”

Every single one of their faces lit up with hope, thinking they might be spared if they could just answer this human’s question. They racked their brains harder than they ever had in their lives, but not one of them had any information on these “Masters.”

After a slight pause, Light turned and glanced over at Mei, who understood the signal and nodded. Mei activated her lie detection magic and scanned the wolfmen. It appeared that none of them had any further knowledge on what “Masters” were or why Light had been marked for death.

Light let out a disappointed sigh. “This total dearth of information is a worse outcome for this encounter than I’d imagined.”

“What shall we do, Master Light?” Mei asked.

Light’s reply was an airy one. “Well, they’ve witnessed our true forms, so I see no reason to let these guys live. Leave Garou alive, but get rid of the rest.”

“As you wish, Master Light,” Mei replied.

A silent gasp escaped Garou’s lips. Mei bowed, and at the exact same moment, all the beastmen around Garou were sliced up into bloody chunks. It happened so fast, none of them even had time to scream. Mei had shot minutely fine threads from her gloves and diced up Garou’s crew. Even though the threads were so thin they were near invisible, the magic they were infused with made them strong enough to be able to instantly slice through steel or even solid orichalcum.

Garou yelped and wet himself at the grisly sight. Luckily for him, the stench of blood in the cavern was so strong, it masked the smell of urine. Light—who showed no sign of being remotely disturbed by the carnage—casually reached into his chest pocket.

“Now that we’ve taken care of those nuisances, let’s teleport out of here with the guy we were after. Oh, I almost forgot. Garou?”

“Eek!” Garou practically jumped out of his skin at the sound of Light’s voice, causing wavelets to ripple through the pool of blood he was sitting in and

making the mounds of raw flesh around him shake.

Light grinned at the comedic spectacle. “Before we teleport out of here, I want to ask you something. With how we are now, do you think we’d be able to win a war against all the nations on the surface world?”

“Oh, well...” Garou paused as Light waited expectantly for his answer. This situation would usually call for cheap flattery in order to keep the victor in good spirits, but Garou had seen what Mei’s lie-detecting magic could do, and it was likely she would use it again on any answer he gave, which meant spinning some cock-and-bull story—even for the purposes of ingratiation—definitely wouldn’t be the right move.

Garou mustered up all of his courage and in a trembling voice, gave his honest assessment. “I-I have no doubt in my mind that you are indeed powerful, Lord Light. N-Not to mention, you have the almighty Fenrir at your command. So I believe you would have a temporary advantage over all the nations of the world. B-But no matter what level you are, you are just one man, and I’m not sure it’s even possible to win against *every* nation...”

In other words, as Light has feared, whole nations were just too big for one person to take on by themselves and emerge victorious.

Garou continued sharing his thoughts on the hypothetical situation posed to him. “After all, it’s conceivable that every nation has a stockpile of legendary weapons, tools, and magic items that they’ve collected over thousands of years. If they were to use them to defend themselves, you and the rest of your gang would be utterly destroyed before you managed to lay waste to half—or even a third—of the world, no matter how strong you are.”

“Hm, I see. Yes, that was our assessment too. One person can only do so much, no matter how strong he or she is,” Light said. He’d been nodding away while Garou had outlined his reasoning for his answer. After a brief moment of consideration, Light made another request. “Then, let me change the question slightly. If I show you my arsenal, will you tell me if you believe it is powerful enough for us to emerge victorious if we wage war against the nations on the surface world?”

“Uh, sure thing,” Garou said hesitantly.

“In that case, let’s relocate,” Light said. “SSR Teleportation—release!”

“Huh?” was Garou’s only response.

As the final word passed Light’s lips, a bright light enveloped the boy, Mei, Garou, and the God Wolf Fenrir. Garou was the only one of the quartet who was wide-eyed with fright at what was happening. Mei and Fenrir didn’t even seem to react to the light that was swallowing them up. Everything went dark for a moment, then brightness returned. Garou’s reaction to his new surroundings was a mix of outright astonishment and abject confusion.

Even though it was bright enough in here to see, the backdrop around Garou was darker than tar. It was a blackness that drained all hope from any who entered this place. Light had used his SSR Teleportation card to transport Garou to the deepest reaches of the Abyss, the world’s most notorious dungeon. Lying in wait for them was an army of monsters that had only previously been spoken of in legends. The ceiling was so high it was barely visible, and the area the waiting creatures were standing in was easily big enough to fit a mansion in.

A long red carpet stretched all the way to the back of the cavernous space, and at the very end of it, an iridescent throne made of gold, jewels, and other precious metals sat majestically against a wall adorned with a giant flag. Three gorgeous girls stood at the bottom of the steps leading up to the throne, and there were massive dragons, giants, and three-headed hounds every bit as large as the God Wolf Fenrir flanking the carpet on either side.

Not all the creatures were fearsome-looking though. Nestled among the groups of giant beasts was a vast array of cuties all in maid outfits with translucent wings affixed to their backs, as well as one knight clad in a dazzling, full gold suit of armor, who stood out from the crowd. One beautiful woman who caught the eye was wearing a scarf that covered her mouth, while another stunning beauty was carrying a musket—though as Garou was unfamiliar with what a musket was, it just looked like some kind of long, spearlike tube to him. Altogether, there were about 3,000 people and creatures of all shapes and sizes in this room, but despite the variety on show, Garou sensed a strong and very singular form of fanatic loyalty from the amassed crowd.

Standing in front of these legendary creatures, Light casually issued an order.

“Everyone, display your stats.”

Light’s voice wasn’t really loud enough to carry all the way around the palatial cavern, yet none of them wasted any time in displaying their stats screens for Garou. A strangled scream escaped Garou as he gazed in disbelief at the range of power levels on show. The fairy maids were all Level 500, the assorted monsters of various shapes and sizes were anywhere between Level 1000 and Level 9000, while the gold-armored knight was Level 5000. But the three girls standing in front of the throne were the most powerful of all. Just like Light and Mei, each of them was Level 9999.

Light strolled down the bright red carpet with stats screens hanging in the air on either side of him. Mei followed closely behind, while the God Wolf Fenrir took its place among the other giant creatures, leaving Garou alone on his little patch of red carpet. As Light made his way along the carpet, members of his army kneeled and bowed their heads as he passed—an action that seemed perfectly natural to them. In fact, Garou got the impression that this act of subservience and respect was considered the correct and most exalted way to conduct oneself in this domain.

Light strode past the kneeling crowd as if this was an established routine here. The three enchanting girls waiting at the foot of the throne also kneeled before the boy, as a way of showing their love for their master. Mei joined the three of them and happily bent the knee too. Without so much as a pause, Light walked up the steps and nonchalantly seated himself on the throne, which had been ostentatiously carved to a degree that made the observer doubt that such a throne could even exist.

“You may raise your heads,” Light said.

The legendary creatures obeyed and lifted their heads in perfect unison. Light then directed his attention to Garou, who was still sitting on his rear all alone on the red carpet.

“This is the army I’ve assembled over the past three years. I’ll ask you again, Garou: will this arsenal be enough to emerge victorious if I were to wage war against the surface nations?”

Garou opened his mouth but all that came out was a series of

incomprehensible sounds. Though in truth, a verbal response wasn't all that necessary, because the look of absolute despair on his face was enough of an answer to the question.

What the hell is this? Has he dragged me into some kinda mythical world? He's got all these creatures—too many to count—who're all ready to rise up from the depths of the Abyss and attack the surface world. Who coulda seen him gettin' himself an army this big? Will all the legendary weapons, tools, and magic items the nations have amassed be enough to fight off this horde?

Even more astonishingly, this army had been put together by an impoverished farmer boy who'd left home only three years before. The same boy Garou and the rest of the Concord of the Tribes had secretly scorned, then finally tried to bump off while laughing at the tears he'd shed over being betrayed. And in those three years, Light hadn't changed one bit. Would a "Lord of Destruction" sitting on his throne have such an innocent, childlike smile on his face? Yet Light had the power to end the world just as easily as a child could knock over a miniature house made of wooden blocks.

Ah, I get it now. We're the ones who made him like this 'cause we tried to kill him.

It was at that moment that Garou realized the full gravity of what he and his party had done. Before they'd betrayed Light, he had been an honest and genuine boy—though a less charitable description would be that he was a naive, ignorant kid. However you chose to look at it, Light had just been an ordinary child with ordinary values, like the kind of young boy you could find anywhere. But because the powers-that-be had ordered Garou and his party to betray Light and eliminate him, this "ordinary boy" had morphed into the threat he was today. Or rather, it had been revealed to Light that he was viewed as something to be used, then thrown on the trash heap when he was of no use anymore. On top of that, because the Concord of the Tribes had been ordered to gang up on Light to kill him, the boy had found out a simple fact of life: it's kill or be killed.

If Light hadn't been made aware of this "fact," he never would've thought to build an army that could destroy nations. But because Garou and his party had bared their fangs against Light first, he now wouldn't hesitate to retaliate with

the army he'd amassed. After all, it was the nations of the world who'd decided to attack Light first, and those who seek to kill a person should always be prepared to be stabbed right back. Consequently, the thought of thousands, millions, perhaps even hundreds of millions of dead bodies piling up at his feet wouldn't make Light so much as flinch. He had the power to destroy the world, and what's more, Garou and his former party were the ones responsible for creating this monster.

By this point, Garou's once-proud fur had turned gray and his despair at the situation he found himself in had caused it to start shedding. He paid no heed to his haggard state, however, as he was too busy weeping bitterly. When Light caught sight of this spectacle, he allowed a satisfied smile to appear on his face.

"Seems the old saying is right: 'Speech is silver, silence is golden,'" said Light. "I was right to choose you as my first target, Garou. You weren't much of a thinker back when we were in the party, but your instincts are sharp, just like an animal's. And judging by your reaction, we have the strength to take on and lay waste to the nations of the world."

After smiling his way through this short speech, Light's gaze suddenly turned icy as his eyes bored into Garou.

"As a reward for acquiescing to my requests, I'll let you live for now. At least until I've uncovered the truth and made a final decision on whether to put an end to all the non-human races. And you'd better stay alive, you hear? Even if you feel like you want to die, you need to stay alive."

For the first time since arriving in the Abyss, Garou howled loudly, but he wasn't wailing at the thought of being brutally tortured over and over until Light came to a final decision on what he would do with him. No, he was lamenting the fact that he and his party had given birth to the ultimate Dark Lord, a diabolical scourge who—depending on his mood—was more than ready and willing to wipe out every other race on the planet until only the humans were left.

Two monsters approached Garou from either side, ready to drag him off to his jail cell. The howling beastman didn't even attempt to run away. Instead, still disregarding how gray and thin his fur was getting, Garou hurled a defiant

question at Light.

“And just who the hell *are* ya, anyway? Are ya tryin’ t’tell me yer some kinda monster out of a fairytale, out to destroy the world?!”

Light didn’t answer, instead holding up his hand to tell the creatures who were about to escort Garou to prison to hold on for a moment. The monsters practically froze in response to Light’s signal, as if time itself had stopped.

When Light’s response to Garou finally came, it was fairly lighthearted. “I’m not a fairytale monster. That’s way over the top. I just want to get revenge on you guys and find out the truth behind why you all wanted to smush me like a bug. And then, after I’m done getting revenge on all of you, I intend to return to my normal life again. In fact, I want to use my Unlimited Gacha to help people and do good in this world.”

Garou started guffawing like a maniac. “Aha ha ha! Whaddaya mean ‘do good’? An agent of destruction like *you* ain’t gonna do a single ounce of good! All ya can do is rain death and disaster down on the realm! Who d’ya think ya are, some kinda god?”

The Abyss monsters were left seething with rage at Garou after the tirade of insults and aspersions he’d just hurled at their one true master. Anyone receiving furious glares that intense would normally be so scared out of their wits that their heart would stop, but Garou was way too far gone to notice and he just carried on howling with crazed laughter.

“Take him away,” said Light, whose eyes had remained on Garou throughout, never once turning away despite his unhinged antics.

The two creatures grabbed an arm each and dragged Garou off to his cell, the wolfman continuing to laugh like a lunatic throughout. The beastman was taken out through the main door, which closed behind him, and once Garou’s cackling had faded into silence, Light took the opportunity to consider what had been said.

“A ‘god,’ huh?” Light whispered to himself as an innocent smile appeared on his face. “I see. The thought never crossed my mind. Well, in that case, I will become a god,” Light declared. “If that’s what he wants, so be it. If that’s what it takes to find out why I was marked for death three years ago and to uncover

the truth about the world I live in, then I shall become a god. Yes, that will be my calling.”

Light turned to his faithful lieutenants once more.

“Thanks to Garou’s reaction, I’m now confident that we have the armed might to subjugate the world so it is at our mercy. Though like he said, it won’t be easy. We need to take the cautious approach.”

Even as he spoke, the Unlimited Gacha continued summoning cards. Light had found a trick that would allow the button on his Gift to be pressed again and again around the clock without the need for him to actually press it himself.

“Our forces will increase over time, but in order to improve our odds of victory, I need intelligence on the most powerful champions from each nation. I particularly need intelligence on these so-called ‘Masters.’”

Even though Light had been unable to uncover any details on what Masters actually *were*, it was blindingly obvious that they must wield substantial powers.

“If there’s more than one Master and they all possess Gifts as powerful as mine, we could be setting ourselves up to have the tables turned on us unexpectedly. So in order to get to the truth, I intend to divert more of our resources to information gathering. Any objections?”

Over the past three years, Light had followed a strict regimen to prepare himself for taking over the Abyss and ascending to the surface world. He’d leveled up, studied hard to expand his knowledge, and summoned reinforcements to add to his already overpowered horde.

As no objections were forthcoming, Light nodded and handed down his decrees. “Worst case scenario, we’re forced to immediately engage in a war. If that does happen, we’ll rely on the formations we’ve come up with. Nazuna, you will be in charge of the vanguard.”

“Ya can count on me, Master!” Nazuna said, her pupils stretched vertically out of excitement. “I’ll slash, kill, and annihilate any obstacle that’s in your way!”

“Ellie, you will be my deputy. You will be in charge of tactics, relaying orders, and forward planning.”

Ellie raised one hand to her witch's hat to keep it from falling off her head and grabbed the hem of her asymmetrical skirt with the other as she curtsied elegantly. "As you wish, Blessed Lord Light. I pledge to devote all of my intelligence and capabilities to your cause."

"Aoyuki, I'm putting you in charge of the monster armies. Can you handle it?"

"Of course. Anything for my master," Aoyuki replied. "Every drop of blood that flows through my veins will serve you to the fullest."

The hem of Aoyuki's cat-eared hood shielded her eyes from view as she said this, and her voice was colder than usual, which only served to underline her absolute willingness to obey the orders she'd been given.

Last of all, Light turned to Mei. "Mei, you will be in charge of collating all the intelligence we gather. You'll also take the lead on the logistical side of things, on providing support, and in identifying any problems I may have overlooked, as well as proposing solutions to them. Can you handle it?"

"On my honor as a maid, I vow to carry out my duties perfectly and to the best of my abilities."

Light nodded at length, visibly satisfied by Mei's enthusiastic response.

"I say to you, nations of the world, that if I find out that the truth you've been hiding from me is just and righteous, then I will become a god who is a charitable gift-giver, showering his subjects with blessings. But if it turns out that all of you were hiding a twisted, evil, ugly truth from me, then I shall become a poisonous gift-giver—a god who will not hesitate to rain death, destruction, and despair down on everyone. When that time comes, this almighty demon will lay waste to all the lands in the realm."

All the way through his little speech pledging global devastation, Light had the smile of an innocent child plastered across his face. In the knowledge that he had the power to destroy the known world at his fingertips, Light mobilized his troops with just a few words.

"Come. We will ascend from the Abyss to the surface world. From out of the darkness and into the light. Let us advance so that we can finally find out the truth!"

And with that, the apocalyptic forces of the Abyss made their way to the surface.

Chapter 1: Departure

“Mom. Dad. I’ve come back.”

After exacting my revenge on Garou the wolfman, I left the Abyss for the surface world. When I was finally above ground, the first place I visited was my parents’ graves in my village. Or at least, what *used* to be my village, as it had been razed to the ground by forces unknown. Could’ve been monsters, raiders, soldiers, or something else entirely.

I’d visited my village once before in the hopes of reuniting with my parents, not long after I’d leveled up and overcome the various obstacles that had kept me from leaving the Abyss. To my shock, I had found my village in ruins and all of the buildings and farms burned to the ground, with the corpses of the villagers—including my parents—scattered everywhere.

I’d tried to figure out who or what could have been responsible for this massacre, but it was too long after the event to tell. Whatever evidence that could have been obtained had been erased by the elements, leaving me no way of finding out whether this was the handiwork of human criminals, monsters, or one of the other races. The only silver lining in all that carnage was that I couldn’t find either my big brother or my sister Yume among the untold number of dead bodies. I’d scoured the area far and wide to make doubly sure, but their remains were nowhere to be found.

Maybe that means they got out alive, I’d thought, allowing myself a slight glimmer of hope. I’d ordered the subordinates who were with me—they’d already begun conducting their information-gathering operations—to also search for my siblings and find the ones who’d destroyed my village, before proceeding to gather up the bodies of my parents and the rest of the villagers and place them all in graves. Among the dead, there were children who could’ve been my friends.

About half a year had passed since that grisly homecoming. After a brief moment of silence, I placed the flowers I’d brought with me in front of the

headstones, kneeled down, and prayed that my parents and the rest of the villagers had had a safe journey into the waiting arms of the Goddess. After offering up my silent prayer, I got up and patted the dust off my clothes.

“Everything tickety-boo, old bean?” asked Gold, who was one of my bodyguards and a member of my questing party. His full appellation was Level 5000, UR Auric Knight, Gold, and as the name suggested, he struck something of an *ostentatious* figure, looking like he was completely made of gold. He wore a full-face helmet, along with a full suit of armor that started at the top of his shoulders and went all the way down to the tips of his toes. A sword and shield slung across his back completed the look. Every single piece of his attire—including the hilt of his sword and the sword’s scabbard—seemed as if it had been dipped in gold. Although his offensive abilities were nothing to write home about, he was the type of fighter who specialized in defense, which is the reason I’d selected him to accompany me on this journey.

“Yes, I was able to say hello to my mom and dad again and tell them the latest news,” I replied.

“Then let us be on our merry way, what? It is best we arrive at our destination while the sun is still high in the sky, so that we can bed down for the night at a real inn. The prospect of sleeping under the bally stars is not an appealing one, I can tell you!”

“Gold! Would it kill you to show an ounce of respect while Lord Light grieves for his parents?! Think about how *he’s* feeling before you go flapping your gums! And don’t call him ‘old bean,’ dammit!”

The girl yelling at Gold was the other bodyguard I’d brought along on the journey: Level 5000, UR Assassin’s Blade, Nemumu. She had dazzling shoulder-length silver hair and wore a scarf that covered her mouth. Boasting a taut, hourglass figure, she was a real beauty who looked about seventeen or eighteen, and the outfit she was wearing exposed much of her tanned, chiseled body. Up until that moment, she’d been watching me with a pained, worried look in her eyes—so much so, in fact, it was as if someone had plunged a knife into her own chest—so her flying off the handle at Gold’s blithe remark wasn’t all that surprising.

Gold took Nemumu's sharp rebuke in his stride and simply shrugged his shoulders.

"Talking like some stuffed shirt would suck out all the warmth and bonhomie that makes these little chinwags enjoyable, m'girl. And besides, Nemumu, I am *quite* sure you would rather not rough it on the first night either, would you?"

"Don't you *dare* lump me in with you! As long as I'm with Lord Light, I'd gladly lie down on the grass, roll around in the mud, or dive into a pit of garbage!"

"And I would be more than delighted to trek deep into the coldest mountain or over lakes of bone-melting lava with milord," Gold replied. "I swore a golden oath of loyalty to my master, which is all part and parcel of the Auric Knight's chivalric code. But if we want our lord to get proper bed rest, it is perhaps best to avoid camping outdoors, wouldn't you say?"

Nemumu let out a quiet gasp. "Y-You're right! Camping on the first night wouldn't be good for Lord Light's sleep *or* health."

"Oh, and another thing, love: if you ask my advice, it would probably be wise *not* to compete with Miss Ellie when it comes to putting on raw shows of devotion for our lord, what? If you go overboard, it could blow up in your face and you might end up royally cheesing him off."

"I-I-I'm *not* putting on a show! And Lord Light would *never* stop loving us! Even if he does end up being repulsed by the sight of me, I will remain his loyal servant! Even if I die, my spirit will continue to serve Lord Light!"

Nemumu's voice quavered as she made this declaration to a visibly exasperated Gold, and tears welled up in her captivatingly angular eyes. I knew it wasn't Gold's and Nemumu's intention to cheer me up, but their comical exchange was like a fresh breeze sweeping away my previously heavy, somber mood. In spite of myself, a smile spread across my face.



“It’s fine, Nemumu,” I said. “I could never be disgusted with any of you. Gold, you shouldn’t pick on her so much.”

“Lord Light!” Nemumu cried, her face brightening at my words, while her eyes sparkled with joy.

“You are too nice for our own good, milord,” Gold said, shrugging with an air of resignation, his arms wide. “There are *some* things that ought to bloomin’ well be said.”

“Well, anyway, I think it’s time to go,” I said. “I don’t really want to sleep outdoors on the first night either.”

In truth, there wasn’t anything actually *forcing* us to sleep outdoors at all, because if it came to it, all I had to do was use my SSR Teleportation card to return us all to the Abyss. But resorting to that on the first day would just make things awkward, so I wanted to avoid that. I turned away from my parents’ graves and retrieved an Unlimited Gacha item from my item box—the SSR Fool’s Mask—as well as grabbing my hooded cloak and staff from where I’d put them down. Before departing, I turned to my parents’ graves once more, but no words passed my lips.

The Concord of the Tribes tried to kill me in the Abyss out of an abundance of caution because I wasn’t a Master. Then sometime later, my home village gets destroyed and nearly everyone in it is massacred. Is it really sensible to chalk this sequence of events up to mere coincidence?

No reasonable person would think the two events weren’t linked in some way. It’s true that the village bordered a primeval forest, meaning it was particularly susceptible to being attacked by monsters and pillagers, but even accounting for that, it was unthinkable for the village to be obliterated in such a manner.

A number of nations wanted me killed just to be on the safe side. It’s highly conceivable they were behind the destruction of my village too.

I didn’t know why they would go as far as wiping out every last little thing that had anything to do with me, but I couldn’t ignore the possibility that the very same people who had ordered my death were also behind this tragedy. If it was

indeed the same nations that had done this to my village out of an abundance of caution...

“Mom, Dad, people of my village: I swear to you all that I will uncover the truth. I will find out what a ‘Master’ is, why I was marked for death, and who destroyed this village. I will also have my revenge on every last member of the Concord of the Tribes that betrayed me and tried to kill me. I promise I will complete each and every single one of these objectives.”

If I uncovered a secret that pointed to the world being beyond redemption, I wouldn’t hesitate to become a poisonous “gift-giver,” bringing destruction, slaughter, and despair, and incinerating all of creation with my hellfire.

My two traveling companions suddenly jumped in shock at the waves of fury emanating from me. Nemumu—who had just offered her own soul to me out of loyalty—let out an audible gasp, and her shock was echoed by Gold, the knight in full armor who usually had an imposing air about the way he carried himself. Birds took flight from the nearby forest and I sensed animals and monsters scrambling to get as far away as possible from where I was standing, grimly silent.

I knew I couldn’t go to the city in the state I was in, so I made an effort to calm myself down. It only took me a few seconds at most to return to normal.

“Mom, Dad, everyone—till we meet again.” Once I’d finished up my goodbyes, I turned my back on the graves for the last time. “Okay, let’s go.”

“R-Right! I-I’ll stick by you wherever you go!” Nemumu said, cheerfully pretending she wasn’t the least bit frightened of me, though her stuttering suggested otherwise. Gold, on the other hand, was much less willing to let my little display slide.

“Milord, you should try to refrain from unleashing that murderous aura when we get to the city. The two of us are quite used to it, but you’d likely give the city folk heart attacks.”

This marked the beginning of our search for the truth, and my odyssey of vengeance.



Our destination was a city in the Dwarf Kingdom, which was a long way southwest of my former village. The city had been built very close to the border with the Elven Queendom because there was a useful dungeon nearby that drew people from far and wide. Due to their close proximity, the Dwarf Kingdom and the Elven Queendom were at odds with each other and the animosity between the two nations appeared to have been going on for a long while.

Dwarves made up the majority of the residents of the city, but since the place was famous for the dungeon just outside it, it was filled with all sorts of races, especially beastfolk. There were quite a few humans there too, many of whom were adventurers, despite the fact the other races regularly persecuted them.

Because of the nearby dungeon, the city was bustling with life. It was also reasonably far away from the metropolis I had been active in with the Concord of the Tribes three years prior, which is largely why I'd chosen this place as a temporary base of operations for this round of questing. The three of us finished registering ourselves as adventurers and took over the entire top floor at the finest inn in the whole city.

"R Silent—release," I said when we reached our rooms. I also used the Rare card Detection and the Super Rare card Magic Jamming to scour the rooms for any magical items, or for anyone who might be surveilling us or eavesdropping, but in the end everything checked out.

Gold let out a hearty belly laugh. "Who would have guessed we would run into some blinkin' bandits so soon into our trek! Can't say much for law and order up here in the surface world, what? You're much safer down in the Abyss!"

"Maybe we should've come by carriage instead of on foot," I said with a sigh as I lounged on the sofa.

After visiting the graves of my parents and the other villagers, the three of us had used powers granted to us by my Unlimited Gacha to transport us just outside the Dwarf Kingdom city. We'd decided on this approach so we could make a more conventional impression on people when we moseyed into town, instead of creating a commotion by magically appearing in the middle of the

street. But after only a short time walking in the direction of the city, we were attacked by bandits, forcing us into a battle we hadn't planned for.

Nemumu tried to cheer me up. "Ah, it's fine. Just shows how there's pretty much no order up here on the surface world, and let's face it, Gold's armor stuck out like a sore thumb. It was practically asking to be stolen! This was the right move, Lord Light. We were able to enter the city without drawing attention to ourselves."

Gold laughed again. "You are quite right there, m'girl. We rolled into town without much fuss and we've even registered ourselves as adventurers. I think we can safely call that a roaring success, old boy."

"Yeah, you're right," I replied with a smile. "It all worked out, and now we're official adventurers."

Nemumu puffed out her cheek and started pouting. "I can't believe they made us all start out as F-rank adventurers. They should've made you A-rank, Lord Light. That receptionist must've been blind."

I chuckled. "Well, what can you expect? In my case, I look like a twelve-year-old human boy. It's only natural they'd place me right at the bottom, at F-rank."

In this world, guilds organized adventurers using a six-rank system. A-rank was reserved for top adventurers, while B-rank was the next step down, for adventurers who were still high-level but not quite as high. C-rank was filled with proficient pros, D-rank was for those considered full-fledged adventurers, and if you had middling experience at questing, you ended up in E-rank. F-rank was for adventurers who were just starting out. There was also an S-rank, which was reserved for the real cream of the crop and not counted as part of the main system because those adventurers were rare exceptions, so the system basically revolved around the six ranks from A to F. Before I was betrayed, I'd only ever been an F-rank adventurer, even before I joined the Concord of the Tribes, so it didn't concern me one bit to find myself once again assigned to F-rank.

"Also, Nemumu," I said. "On the surface world, you should call me Dark, not Light. I'm not concerned about people listening in right now as I've swept the rooms with my cards, but be careful what you call me while on the surface

world.”

“S-Sorry, Lord Ligh—I mean, Lord Dark!” a flustered Nemumu replied.

My original plan had been to use Light as my name while on this adventure, but I figured I didn’t really want any of the former Concord of the Tribes party members hearing about me, as it would instantly put them on guard. I couldn’t risk my plan for revenge ending in disappointing failure, so I’d chosen an alias for my trip to the surface world and gave that when I’d re-registered as an adventurer. I also decided to don my SSR Fool’s Mask, which had the power to create illusions and hinder recognition.

Still on the sofa, I turned to my two escorts. “I want to make sure we’re all on the same page about what we came to the surface world to accomplish,” I said.

Our goals were: to conduct a probe into the nations that were looking for Masters, and to get in contact with anyone seeking these Masters; to gather intelligence on champions and high-ranking magic items; to increase our rankings and gain access to higher-quality intelligence and connections; if at all possible, to get our hands on a Master that hadn’t yet been found by any of the nations; to gather other kinds of intelligence.

After relating these goals, Gold raised his hand. “That’s all fine and dandy, milord, but are you expecting us not to be earning *any* money at all for the duration of this little foray? Surely we will need some readies if we want to get on all right up here, no?”

“The people I sent to gather intelligence on the surface world are working as traders and earning money that way, so there’s no need to worry about our finances,” I told him. “Plus, if we don’t have enough, we can always make fake money. While money *is* important, I don’t think we need to make too big a deal of it.”

Six months ago, I’d dispatched agents to work undercover as merchants and in a number of other jobs, giving them all seed money so they could start up businesses. I’d gotten a subordinate who was an expert forger to make counterfeit money based on every nation’s currency, made from the gold and silver bars generated by my Unlimited Gacha. Thanks to that skilled underling, the counterfeits were completely indistinguishable from the real coins.

Hearing we had made fake money caused a deeply impressed Gold to bellow, “Oh, good show, milord! Who ever would have thought we could build a war chest using such a contrivance? Takes an extremely imaginative fellow to come up with a trick like that, what? And furthermore, it amounts to a nice bit of payback to all those other races that looked down on you, so it’s two birds with one stone! But wait a tick. Wouldn’t it cause a bit of a hoo-ha if anyone were to find out about the counterfeits?”

“That won’t be a problem because the forgeries are perfect. We’re also minimizing the amount of money we’re bringing up to the surface world. After all, we’re not here to wreck economies.” In other words, the money we had on hand wouldn’t be enough to grant us any influence to speak of.

Nemumu was the next to raise her hand. “I understand why you want us to be adventurers on the surface world, but is there really any need for *you* to dirty your hands with any of this, Lord Dark? I know you’re all-powerful, but there *is* a non-zero chance that an accident might befall you. I would feel much better if you were safe and sound back in the Abyss, ordering us to...” Nemumu suddenly found herself unable to finish her sentence.

“Nemumu...” I said. “Are you saying you want to deprive me of exacting revenge with my own two hands?”

“N-No! I was just...” Nemumu stuttered.

“Are you looking to stand in my way?” I said.

“Eek! F-Forgive me, Lord! I didn’t mean for it to come out like that!” Nemumu squeaked as she got down on her knees and groveled an apology, sweat dripping from every pore in her body. As tears streamed down her face and she trembled in fear, she folded her hands together as if she was feverishly praying to a deity.

Gold roared with laughter again. “There are certainly times when a man has to grab the bull by the horns and do the thing himself, even if it means putting his own life in danger. He’s getting down in the mud to take his revenge without relying on anyone else for help, m’girl. Our lad is a real firecracker, if you ask me! I swear upon my title as the Auric Knight that I am proud of you, milord!” He guffawed once more.

Gold's laughter helped me to regain my composure. Whenever I talked about getting revenge for being betrayed, I always lost my cool. Even nearly three years later, my burning desire for vengeance hadn't subsided even a little. I didn't know whether that was something to curse or celebrate.

I got up from the sofa, went over to Nemumu—who was still on her knees, praying for forgiveness—and patted her silver hair. “Sorry. I let myself get a bit emotional. I shouldn't have scared you like that.”

“No, it was my fault for going too far!” Nemumu objected. “Please allow me to demonstrate my loyalty to you, Lord Light!”

“Uh, sure...” Nemumu had just called me “Light” again, but I felt like this wasn't the right moment to correct her. I went back to the sofa, sat down again, and took off my right shoe, then offered my foot to Nemumu.

“Pardon me, Lord,” Nemumu said, her face flushed as her fingers softly clasped my right foot as if it were a jewel made out of extra-brittle rock candy. With no small amount of tenderness, she slowly pressed her lips to the top of my foot, and even though I was still wearing a sock, I could feel the heat from Nemumu's face.

Kissing someone's feet would normally be considered one of the most humiliating acts of submission one could imagine, yet my followers would often insist I let them do it, as if they saw it as some kind of reward. Meanwhile, on the flip side, I was usually the one who ended up feeling embarrassed by this show of loyalty.

Gold looked on as Nemumu performed this deferential act. “Having fun, are we?” he quipped quietly.

“You maggot!” Nemumu bit back. “How dare you mock my deep devotion and dedication to Lord Light in that way!”

“Gadzooks, madam!” Gold retorted. “Whichever way you slice it, this scene plainly looks like a full-grown woman getting her jollies by canoodling with the foot of a twelve-slash-thirteen-year-old lad! I thought I already impressed upon you the need to keep these raw shows of devotion in check, m'girl!”

“It's not a ‘show,’ dammit! I'm acting out of pure love and devotion for our

exalted Lord Light! And for your information, I was *not* getting my j-j...” —the word stuck in her craw—“‘jollies,’ as you put it! I was simply demonstrating my unadulterated fealty to Lord Light!”

“Calm down, Nemumu,” I interjected. “I don’t doubt your loyalty to me.”

“Lord Light!” On hearing my words, a rush of emotion turned Nemumu’s cheeks beet-red and her whole body trembled as what could only be described as a noise of pure pleasure passed her lips. Witnessing this spectacle, Gold turned the palms of his hands upwards and shrugged in a snidely resigned manner. I smiled awkwardly at the two super-powered warriors and carried on where I’d left off.

“Anyway, tomorrow, we’ll go questing in the nearby dungeon. Though once Ellie’s finished laying all the groundwork for me to take revenge against Sasha the elf, I’ll prioritize that mission. You both got that?”

“As you command, Lord Light,” Nemumu replied.

“You will bear witness to the quintessential Auric Knight in the dungeon tomorrow, milord!” Gold declared.

I nodded my satisfaction at their enthusiastic replies.

Chapter 2: Plans Below the Surface

The following scene took place a short while back, only a few days after I'd taken my revenge on Garou. I had gathered my troops in the executive office I'd built for myself in the Abyss, and I was sat facing my elite Level 9999 warriors, who were lined up in front of me: the Ever-Seeking Maid, Mei; the Genius Monster Tamer, Aoyuki; the Forbidden Witch, Ellie; and the Ancestral Vampire Knight, Nazuna.

"Thankfully, I was able to exact my revenge on Garou without a hitch," I said. "Now the next step in my plan is to ramp up our intelligence gathering."

Despite what my bombastic display to Garou had implied, suddenly declaring war on the rest of the world without knowing what I was up against would be the height of foolishness. We needed to collect information on the military capabilities of the surface world nations before even contemplating that.

"Of course, I will never stop seeking vengeance for what was done to me, but in the worst-case scenario, I could be soundly defeated without getting my revenge on the seven other party members, without finding out what a 'Master' is, without knowing why I was marked for death, and without discovering who destroyed my village."

Ellie hung her head as she listened to my words. "I hope you can forgive me, my Blessed Lord. You may have been able to save your village if only I'd been able to recalibrate the dungeon core faster."

"It's not your fault, Ellie," I assured her. "The Abyss is huge, after all. It took a while to make every corner of it our own, and we weren't able to use the Teleportation card at first. There were a whole load of things we didn't anticipate."

The Concord of the Tribes called the place where they'd tried to assassinate me the "middle layer" of the Abyss, but in truth, it was still very near the surface. To put it in terms that are easier to understand visually, if you had to descend 100 floors to reach the very bottom of the Abyss, that so-called

“middle layer” would only be around the 10th floor down. But even after I’d completely taken over the Abyss, I still wasn’t able to use the Teleportation card due to the dungeon core. What’s a dungeon core, you ask? For me to explain that, I’d have to recount the tale of how the world was created.

In the beginning, the world was a syrupy black vortex of nothingness until the Goddess shone light upon the darkness, causing the lands to emerge and the nine races to be born. These races were humans, beastfolk, dragonutes, elves, dark elves, dwarves, demonkin, onifolk, and centaurs. But the leftover dregs of the darkness clumped together and molded itself into the Undergod of Evil. The Undergod fell in love with the Goddess and tried to take possession of her, but was quickly sealed beneath the earth, unable to ascend to the surface.

The Undergod, however, was able to make monsters out of his own flesh and send them up to the surface world through the dark holes that dotted the land (These “holes” were widely believed to be metaphors for dungeons). He did this so the monsters would pile up on top of each other, enabling the Undergod to reach the Goddess. The nine races created by the light from the Goddess fought these monsters to protect their deity, and in turn, the monsters attempted to eliminate the races that stood in their way. This battle continued from antiquity to the present day, and that was the tale of how the world was created.

Monsters are stronger at night because that’s when the Undergod’s powers are at their most intense. It is also said that monsters become more powerful the further underground you go, because they are closer to the Undergod’s energy.

I’d long planned to make the Abyss our base of operations, as I saw it as the ideal location due to how extremely difficult it was to set foot in the deepest reaches of what was said to be the most dangerous dungeon in the world. It would also be fairly easy for us to travel back and forth to the surface world from here using the SSR Teleportation card.

But there were a number of hurdles I had to clear before I could use these powers of teleportation. First of all, I had no understanding of the mechanics behind a dungeon core, which was the term commonly given to the mass of power from the Undergod considered to be a piece of his life energy. If one destroyed a dungeon core, the dungeon itself would cease to function. It was

also believed the destroyer would gain the power of the dungeon core, and thus, the Undergod would be weakened as a result.

After me and my comrades had taken over the Abyss, Ellie—who was an expert in dark arts—had tried to examine the Abyss’s dungeon core, but had been unable to completely comprehend it either. According to Ellie, a dungeon core absorbed energy and mana from the planet and—for some unexplained reason—created dungeons, then amassed minerals and other materials to craft treasure chests and items, produced monsters, and created magical traps. The dungeon cores were responsible for creating the wide diversity of environments that came together to form the world we lived in.

But when I asked Ellie how the dungeon cores could do all of these things, even she wasn’t really sure. And if Ellie didn’t know, then none of my other followers were likely to have a clue either. Ultimately, thanks to Ellie’s efforts, we were able to limit the powers of the dungeon core to a level that kept the Abyss intact. She also managed to find a workaround for the teleportation jamming problem we’d been having, which allowed me to successfully transform the Abyss into a stronghold.

Due to these modifications, the Abyss no longer produced items or monsters, so I’d been compensating with cards from my Unlimited Gacha. Then, about six months before the scene in my office, I was finally able to leave the Abyss, and not long after, I had that fateful homecoming at my already-devastated village.

“Monsters or bandits may have been the ones to actually destroy my village, but it must have something to do with the same people who tried to have me killed after they’d determined I wasn’t a ‘Master,’” I said in my office in the Abyss. “It’s completely plausible that, whoever these people are, they made some kind of deal with a pack of monsters or bandits to wipe my village out of existence. Even if there’s an entire nation behind this, I’ll make sure they pay the ultimate price for destroying my family and village.”

The Level 9999 warriors standing in front of me suddenly went pale due to the murderous vibes that were radiating off of me. The dark energy was so intense, the office audibly creaked in several places.

I breathed out heavily and forced myself to calm down, because I knew

getting angry wouldn't help me find the offending parties. At this particular moment in time, I needed to focus on gathering intelligence.

"So besides collecting information, I'm also thinking about my next target for retribution: Sasha the elf."

Sasha, a former member of the Concord of the Tribes, had deceived me, called me "stupid," and tried to assassinate me. At the mere mention of her name, the faces of all the girls except for Mei lit up and each of them volunteered for the mission.

"Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie said. "If you're going to bait and double-cross the elf like you did to Garou, then by all means, let me take on this assignment!"

"No way, toots! I got this one!" Nazuna butted in.

"Mrreow!" Aoyuki added.

I appreciated their enthusiasm, but I shook my head ruefully. "I'm glad you guys are all so ready and willing, but we aren't going to repeat what we did to Garou. Yes, I wanted to take revenge on Garou, but I also wanted him to tell me that my army is strong enough to take on the surface world nations. He was from the Beastfolk nation, one of the least powerful non-human ones. On top of that, he was the easiest of the eight party members to reel in, so that's why I used Mei as bait."

I'd been able to gauge our fighting capabilities by battling Garou's gang and witnessing his reaction when he saw my arsenal. All the signs pointed to my army being plenty strong enough to wage war against the rest of the world—though that being said, I wasn't stupid enough to pick a fight against the entire world without gathering some intelligence on what we might find ourselves facing first.

"Unlike Garou, Sasha won't be so easy to lead by the nose to the Abyss. And besides, where's the fun in repeating the same revenge plot? I want her to experience the same misery I felt."

"The same misery, Master Light?" asked Mei, her head slightly cocked to one side.

I responded to her question with an innocent, cherub-like smile. "Our agents

on the surface have informed us that Sasha is about to marry the deputy knight commander, who is related to the royal family by blood. She must be on cloud nine right now, and as a former fellow party member of hers, I want to ‘celebrate’ this happy occasion in the best way possible.”

Just the thought of wreaking terrible vengeance on Sasha made me smile so broadly even I was painfully aware of it. “And I’ve just figured out the *exact* wedding present I should get for her.”

Once I’d related my plot for revenge to the girls, Ellie was the first to throw her hands in the air in elation. “What a simply marvelous idea! I knew you would come up with the perfect plan, Blessed Lord Light! But if you let me handle it, I know I can achieve an outcome very close to what you desire, Blessed Lord.”

“Oh?” I asked. “Let’s hear your idea then.”

“Of course! What I’d do is...” And so, Ellie proceeded to lay out a new plot for revenge that was somewhat modified from what I’d just described. It basically stuck to the main outline of my proposal while vastly improving upon it by adding additional elements that closely manifested what I was going for.

“There are still some specifics I need to work out, but I believe this general framework will do nicely,” Ellie said once she’d finished explaining it all. “What do you think, Blessed Lord Light?”

“It’s awesome! It’s absolutely genius!” I said excitedly. “You’re incredible, Ellie! That’s so much better than what I came up with!”

Ellie bowed sheepishly as I heaped praise on her. “Oh please. I could only come up with those additions because of your original plan, Blessed Lord Light. However, in order for this plan to succeed, we will require the use of your Unlimited Gacha and we will need plenty of manpower. Forgive my impudence, but is it possible to ask for your assistance in this, Blessed Lord Light?”

“Of course you may,” I said. “I’ll give you all the materials, labor, and information you want, plus anything else you deem necessary. I authorize this plan to be carried out in my name.”

“Thank you very much, Blessed Lord!” Ellie exclaimed as she bowed deeply

once more. When she lifted her head again, she shot a triumphant look in the direction of Mei. I knew Ellie viewed Mei as her rival, so I pretended not to see it. Mei didn't say a word—though she'd definitely noticed the look—while Aoyuki had also caught the silent exchange, uttering a meek “Mew” to sum up her feelings. Nazuna seemed to be the only one who was oblivious to Ellie's rather impertinent attitude.

“Looks like I'll be put to work too, if this plan goes how it's s'posed to!” she said. “Ooh, I'm so *psyched* for this! Ellie, ya better set everything up pronto, ya hear?”

“You don't need to tell *me* that, halfling!” Ellie huffed. “Not only will I be quick about it, I will perform to the best of my ability for my Blessed Lord Light!”

Nazuna's sunny personality instantly cleared the air and chased away the awkwardness of the situation that had been brewing. She reminded me once again of the invaluable role she played as the life and soul of my inner circle, even if at times, she wasn't especially thoughtful.

I casually cleared my throat to grab the girls' attention again. “As you all know, I'll soon begin what I'm calling Operation Adventurer, which is part of our wider intelligence-gathering operation. I'll be engaged in that activity until we're ready to initiate this revenge plot against Sasha. Ellie, I need you to devote all of your efforts to this revenge project. If you need any help or need to discuss any problems with me, don't hesitate to say. This project is of the highest priority.”

“Understood, Blessed Lord,” Ellie replied.

Once I'd finished giving Ellie her instructions, Mei interjected with a request. “Master Light, if you are intending to re-register with a guild as an adventurer, I would like to accompany you as well.”

This prompted the two other girls to chime in too.

“Meow!” Aoyuki piped up.

“I'm stronger than Mei *and* Aoyuki! C'mon, master! Take me along as your questing partner!” Nazuna begged me.

“I'm flattered that the three of you want to come with me, but that would

leave Ellie all alone to take care of things down here. Mei, I need you to take charge of the dungeon while I'm away. We captured Garou and killed his lackeys, so we should expect search parties to show up in the Abyss sometime soon. I don't want to draw too much attention here just yet though, so kill half of the searchers and spare the other half."

"As you wish, Master Light," Mei said. "On my honor as a maid, I will do everything in my power to carry out my duties as requested."

Mei didn't need any further explanation on the matter. By killing half of the searchers in the most horrific manner possible, it would maintain the Abyss's reputation as the most notorious dungeon in the realm—at least for the time being—despite the fact I'd brought order to my domain. The other half that survived would go back home and faithfully relate the horrors they'd seen to the rest of the world.

"Aoyuki, I need you to patrol the forests around the Abyss," I said. "We don't want any dangerous individuals or monsters disrupting our plans."

"Mrrow," Aoyuki purred, her cat-eared hood swaying in assent.

"And Nazuna..." I started.

Nazuna looked at me, her eyes sparkling with anticipation at what kind of job I was about to assign to her. She was peerless when it came to close combat, and if equipped with enchanted items that repelled magical attacks, she would almost certainly be the strongest fighter in my army. But therein lay her weakness: she was simply too powerful to take on regular quests. She also wouldn't be a good fit for situations that required quick-thinking and adaptability. She might be the life and soul of this dungeon, but well, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. I couldn't just leave her with nothing to do, though.

"Nazuna, I need you to protect this dungeon while I'm away. I don't think anyone will make it as far as the bottom of the Abyss, but just in case anything like that *does* happen, I can't think of anyone better to drive out the intruders."

"Ya got it!" Nazuna said with gusto. "Ya can count on me, master! I'll make sure to keep everyone safe!"

And with that, I chose the Auric Knight, Gold, as the tank I'd take on my journey, and since questing in dungeons was the fastest way to gain reputation on the surface world, I also chose to take the Assassin's Blade, Nemumu, with me due to her exceptional abilities at scouting, disarming traps, and sniffing out enemies. And that was the whole decision-making process that had brought me and my party to the city in the Dwarf Kingdom in the present day.

Chapter 3: Line Jumpers

Early the following morning, we joined the line at the dungeon entrance so we could start questing. The dungeon was all the way over on the other side of the city from the inn, and since the Dwarf Kingdom was encircled by mountains, it probably wasn't a huge surprise that the dungeon was at the foot of one of them. The entrance to the cave-like dungeon was enclosed by a tall wall similar to a castle's, with a steel gate that was open wide so that adventurers could enter. Dwarf soldiers stationed at the gate checked the tags of the adventurers as they passed through, and the whole place was teeming with food stalls and hawkers trying to sell their wares to the people in line.

"Meat skewers! Start your day with meat skewers for breakfast!" shouted one.

"We've got great discounts on dried food right now!" another hawker bellowed.

"Healing potions! Salve for your wounds! Arrows! Other projectiles! You name it, we got it!" yelled a third.

Gold—who was standing in front of me in line—surveyed the scene, deeply captivated. "Hm..." he hummed. "It would appear it's mainly humans, beastfolk, centaurs, and dwarves here. There are hardly any elves, dark elves, demons, onifolk, or dragonutes."

"That's because the elves and the dwarves have been fighting over this dungeon for absolutely ages. It's been something of a source of strife between the two races," I explained. "That's why you don't see too many elves here. The reason dark elves, demons, onifolk, and dragonutes are few and far between is simply because of geography. I guess there are a lot of humans here because they're looking to quest in the dungeon."

"You're so smart, Lord Dark," said Nemumu, who was in line behind me. "You have perfectly dissected the situation."

I was sandwiched in between Gold and Nemumu for a reason: Gold was in front because he was my tank, and due to her superior skills at detection, Nemumu took the rear and kept watch. It was practically unthinkable that I could be bested by a surface world adventurer, but we'd taken this formation just to be on the safe side. At least that's what Nemumu had said when she'd first suggested this approach. "I can't let anything happen to you, Lord Light," she'd told me at the time with an especially serious expression on her face.

Back in the present, she was standing behind me with her arms wrapped around my shoulders. I didn't doubt that this was her way of carrying out her bodyguard duties, but this particular pose meant two soft lumps were pressing up against the back of my head. Even though it made me blush to stand like this, I had no choice but to quietly acquiesce to Nemumu's methods. And anyway, I looked like a boy of no more than twelve or thirteen, while Nemumu looked like she was either seventeen or eighteen, which meant anyone looking at us would've just assumed we were very close siblings. That said, we did look strangely out of place here. The adventurers, hawkers, food stall workers, and all the other folk around us were eying us with great curiosity. Some of the glances cast our way were altogether more disdainful, as if they were wondering what these *humans* were doing in this line.

We must have been some sight, though. Gold—resplendent as always in his head-to-toe golden armor—was a head taller than most, and on top of being a tanned-skin beauty, Nemumu's silvery hair shimmered in the bright morning sunshine. She was attracting plenty of looks—some affectionate, some lecherous—from the men in the crowd, while the women stared daggers at her, their eyes filled with jealousy, though there were a few lustful glances in there too. Because I was standing between these two curiosities, and partly due to the mask I was wearing, I drew a number of prying stares as well.

I looked down the line and saw party members all seeming to get along with each other, talking and laughing as they waited to go into the dungeon, which put me in mind of my days in the Concord of the Tribes. Seeing all these other parties like this caused me to muse somewhat pointlessly about the past.

If I'd been a better adventurer, maybe they wouldn't have tried to kill me.

I was rudely snapped out of wallowing in my memories by a group that

suddenly cut in line in front of the party that was in front of Gold. The latter appeared to be entirely made up of rookie adventurers in their mid-teens, while the former that had barged their way in front of them were all hooded. One of the hooded party was about 170 cm tall and was carrying a large item wrapped in cloth on his back, his gait seemingly unaffected by the weight of it, suggesting he was incredibly powerful. Another party member was even taller—probably about 180 cm in height—but although he was quite well-built, he looked weaker and more vulnerable than the other guy. The final member of their party appeared to be a tagalong who was carrying a large set of luggage.

The group of young adventurers the hooded party had jumped in front of were all human, and because there was no real way of telling what race the hooded party was, the party of teens decided not to say anything. They just stood there, exchanging confused glances with one another, clearly wondering what they should do about it. I quickly realized they were paralyzed by indecisiveness and stepped in to help.

“Hey, hooded guys. Let’s not go cutting in, yeah?”

The hoods all turned toward me. The rookie adventurers who were caught in-between withered in fear.

“You’re talking to *me* of all people?” the hooded guy with the large item on his back said, seemingly affronted. “Do you have any idea who you’re talking to?!”

“You expect me to recognize someone whose face is hidden under a hood?” I replied. “Of course I don’t know who you are, and if you really *are* well-known, then all the more reason not to cut in line, right? It’s disgraceful.”

Gold followed up my dressing down with a thunderous laugh. “You heard milord, lads! It’ll go a darn sight better for you if you keep those hoods up and stay anonymous, what? Did you chaps come doddering on over here after a midmorning tippie or three? Now, that’s quite enough of this tomfoolery. Get yourselves to the back of the queue, quick smart. It’s not just us you’re inconveniencing—you’re causing trouble for everyone else who’s obeyed the rules and queued up properly.”

“Lord Dark’s right,” Nemumu chimed in. “You three better shove off all the

way to the back. Are you too *stupid* to know how lines work?”

Other human adventurers behind me backed me up and started jeering at the hooded party.

“The boy’s absolutely right! You wouldn’t want us knowing who you are under that hood, would you?” shouted one.

“Hear, hear! Do what the boy says and go join the back of the line!” shouted another.

In truth, they probably only spoke up after seeing some fellow humans standing up to a bunch of bullies. While adventurers were known for having a whole heap of bravado anyway, it probably helped that they didn’t know what race the hooded party were. The dwarf and beastfolk adventurers in line stood in silence, watching the scene with frosty looks on their faces. They probably didn’t care much for the hooded party either, but lowly humans making a ruckus probably peeved them even more.

“Y-You people are no more than inferior insects waiting to be crushed under our feet!” said the hooded man who’d spoken before. Judging by his words and conduct, he was very prideful, and I could see him shaking with rage at the jeering directed toward him. But I ignored his anger and carried on giving him a dressing-down.

“I’m trying to explain it to you, because even an insect knows the rules. I’m sure you know I’m right, so I’ll ask you once again to go join the back of the line.”

“Y-You dare talk back to me?!” the hooded man spat, and he was just about to start unwrapping the large item he was carrying when he was stopped by the taller member of his party.

“Calm yourself. It is not in our best interests to use that thing in front of all these people,” he said.

The shorter of the two let out a noise of pure frustration and gritted his teeth. “Stupid inferiors. You think you’re better than insects? This isn’t over!”

After he’d spat out that last bit, the hooded man and his two fellow party members vacated the spot in the line that they’d stolen and trudged off, all the

way to the back. The humans behind me congratulated me for driving off the bullies.

“That’s showin’ ’em we humans got guts, kid!” shouted one.

After me and my party had thanked the crowd for their kind words, the leader of the rookie party in front of us stepped forward to express his gratitude for what we’d done. “Uh, erm, thank you very much for helping us out!”

He was a fairly young boy with short red hair, and the group he commanded appeared to be a party of four. Standing directly behind the boy was one of the party’s other members: a young girl with the same color hair as the leader and who closely resembled him. There was also a somewhat shortish boy who had a mischievous look about him, and another boy who was the tallest member of the group. The lone girl in the party looked like she was about twelve or thirteen, while the boys all looked around fourteen or fifteen.

“It all happened so suddenly. We didn’t know what to do about those people,” the boy said, bowing his head at us. “After all, we could’ve ended up getting into a fight with members of a very prideful race. I’m sorry you got dragged into our mess.”

“Oh, please, don’t give it a second thought,” I replied brightly. “I was only doing what was right. And besides, if we’d allowed them to jump in, we would’ve had to wait longer for our turn.” That answer appeared to set the boy’s mind at rest, and we both smiled at each other.

“Seriously though, we owe you one, dude,” the mischievous-looking boy piped up from behind his party leader. “By the way, that mask you’re wearing is awesome. And is this knight’s armor made of *real* gold or what?”

“Gimra, stop!” his leader snapped. “You’re being rude!”

“Aw, come on, boss,” the boy known as Gimra said. “I bet we’re all dying to know.”

Gold guffawed at the exchange. “I can’t say I blame you whippersnappers for being curious about my golden armor. Now, to answer your question about this here armor—”

“No, it’s not made of real gold,” Nemumu interjected before Gold had a

chance to explain. “It just looks like it. Because if you think about it, it wouldn’t make sense to cover yourself in real gold. It’s too soft a metal to be of any use as armor.”

The other adventurers in the vicinity who had overheard Nemumu’s explanation nodded at this, finding it completely logical. Though in reality, the alloy Gold’s armor was made from did indeed contain gold. It had simply been mixed with some other rare metals to increase its protective strength. The reason the armor looked like it was made of pure gold was because it had been fashioned in such a way that it retained the sheen you get on gold. However, there was no real need to tell everybody that.

The boy with red hair bowed his head again. “F-Forgive my party member for being so impolite.”

“It’s perfectly all right,” I said matter-of-factly. “Gold chooses to wear that armor—or should I say, he *insists* on wearing it—and people often make that mistake. He’s used to it.”

This was actually a cover story. There was no point in even trying to paint the armor another color because some kind of magic on it just ended up restoring its gold hue. In any case, if Gold stayed, well, gold, it’d help us gain fame as adventurers, which was crucial to our operation, so I didn’t see his armor as much of a problem.

“I-I guess people can be quite particular over one thing or another,” said the boy, tying a neat bow around that thread of conversation. The other adventurers probably accepted that Gold was just a regular knight with a really odd hangup about his armor. After the slightly awkward mood had dissipated, the young leader continued the conversation.

“This might sound a little disrespectful after you helped us out and everything, but is this your first time questing in this dungeon?” he asked.

“Huh? You can tell that just by looking at us?” I asked, puzzled. The leader nodded with no hint of hesitation.

“Well, there are many different types of dungeons, you see, and this dungeon is unique in that each floor is absolutely massive. Because of that, you’re usually forced to spend the night in there, which is why everyone’s brought camping

equipment with them. Your party doesn't seem to have any gear, so I figured you can't have been to this dungeon before. I recommend bringing camping equipment with you the next time you come here to quest."

Now that he mentioned it, his party wasn't the only one that had brought camping equipment with them. I looked around and it seemed as if every other party had camping gear in tow, alongside the usual weapons and armor. Of course, camping equipment would be essential if you were looking to venture deep into a dungeon, but for short-haul quests that lasted less than a day, it was less of a necessity. If this were any other dungeon, turning up without gear wouldn't be unusual enough to remark on. Each member on my team was equipped with an Item Box, so we hadn't thought to bring luggage with us. But I thanked the boy with red hair for his advice all the same.

"Thanks for letting us know that," I said. "We're only here for a bit of a preview of this dungeon today, but I guess next time, we'll make sure to bring some camping gear."

"To be honest, I wish I could give you more pointers to thank you for helping us," the boy said.

"It's fine," I assured him. "Your advice has helped us a lot."

"Next!"

While we were conversing, the party of teenagers was finally beckoned forward to enter the dungeon. All four of them bowed to us one last time before hurrying off toward the entrance. My party was called next, and as I crossed the threshold into the dungeon, I pondered the conversation I'd just had.

Item Boxes are rare, so would it have looked even more suspicious if I'd told them we do actually have camping equipment? Maybe if anyone else asks, I should reveal that one of us has an Item Box. Or maybe we should've brought physical luggage with us to blend in a bit better.

I continued weighing up my options as my party made its way into the dungeon.



“Oh, wow,” I said, barely unable to contain my amazement as I stared out at the green meadows sprawling before me. From outside, the entrance to the dungeon had looked like a cavernous structure dug into the foothills of a mountain, but once inside, I could see forests off in the distance, and there was even a river winding its way across the scenery to complete the illusion. Above my head was a gorgeous azure sky that seemed even bluer than any you’d find in the world outside.

This is way different from the Abyss... I couldn’t help silently comparing this place to my own dungeon, which me and my allies had converted into a stronghold. No matter how far down you went into the Abyss, there were no grasslands, volcanoes, or glaciers in there, and the dungeons I’d visited while I was in the Concord of the Tribes had all been cave-like affairs, so seeing a totally natural-looking meadow inside this dungeon was a new experience for me. There were other kinds of dungeons too, of course, such as the complicated labyrinth variety, but how environments like these could develop inside a dungeon remained a complete mystery to experts. A wide range of researchers were prone to ascribing this phenomenon—almost dismissively—to the powers of the Undergod.

“Lord Dark,” said an expectant Nemumu, who was bringing up the rear.

“Other adventurers will be coming this way soon, so let’s move,” I said to Nemumu as I started walking off. I pointed to the forest in the distance where I figured we could have a bit more privacy. Gold—who was walking in front of me—surveyed the scenery, visibly fascinated.

“That lad was right,” he said. “This place is ruddy enormous! This one area might be bigger than the whole bally city we were just in.”

“Yes, probably,” I replied. “Back when I was part of the Concord of the Tribes, I heard this was a great dungeon if you wanted to make some money and find treasure chests, but this is nothing like I was told it would be. I guess we really do need camping equipment if we want to quest in a place this huge. Plus, if we were to set up camp for an extended period of time to fight the monsters in here, we’d end up walking out with huge quantities of materials and magic gems after just one round of questing. It’d save us heaps of time because we wouldn’t have to keep entering and exiting the dungeon, and it’d increase the

chances of us finding treasure chests.”

I’d chosen this dungeon because it was far enough away from the metropolis where the Concord of the Tribes had been active that fewer people would recognize me here. Another reason was that it would be easy to raise my rank since this dungeon had a favorable reputation among adventurers. But I’d never expected this dungeon would require camping gear to basically do anything in it...

“Lord Dark, don’t you think we should maybe change locations?” Ever since we’d entered the dungeon, Nemumu had let go of my shoulders and positioned herself a little further behind me, and I could tell she was busy checking out our rear and the general surroundings. We hadn’t ventured all that far from the entrance, so other adventurers could still be seen milling around here and there, though due to the fact that monsters could jump out at any moment, they weren’t at liberty to linger and listen in on our conversation, even if they did register our presence. I shook my head at Nemumu’s suggestion.

“I’m surprised each floor can be as vast as this one, but that’s the only unforeseen development. It doesn’t change our objectives in any way,” I said. Our mission was to raise our ranks as adventurers so we could gain access to any intelligence the elites might have. To achieve that, all we needed to do was defeat some monsters and make progress toward clearing floors. “I will admit that this dungeon is novel and interesting,” I added. “We should make the most of our time in here by raising our ranks.”

Gold laughed uproariously. “It’s certainly not like the craggy hole in the ground we’re all used to, what?”

“Well, I like our dungeon,” Nemumu said, a little sniffily. “It’s the one Lord Dark has conquered.”

The only dungeons I’d been in before were set up like caves, so the natural beauty of this one was a refreshing departure. Gold and Nemumu both agreed with my conviction that we should raise our adventurer ranks in this dungeon, and we strolled airily across the landscape, as if we were just going for a picnic. We eventually reached the forest without encountering any monsters to speak of, and plunged deep into the mess of trees to get away from prying eyes.

“Nemumu,” I prompted.

“I sense no monsters or people present within a 100-meter radius,” she replied.

“R Detection, R Silent, SR Magic Jamming—release.” I didn’t distrust Nemumu’s detection skills, but I felt it was best to activate these cards just to make doubly sure we were in the clear. After using the Detection card to confirm there were no creatures or people nearby, I used the Silent card to prevent anyone from eavesdropping on us, and Magic Jamming to make it impossible for anyone to observe us using sorcery. Once we’d made sure our location was secure from any potential encroachment, we proceeded to the next phase of our operation.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s find the stairway quickly and head to the second floor.”

“We aren’t going to give the monsters on this floor a jolly good hiding, milord?” Gold asked.

“Better to defeat monsters on the second floor than the first,” I told him. “And third-floor monsters would help raise our ranks even faster, don’t you think?”

“In that case, I’ll go search for this floor’s stairway!” Nemumu piped up, knowing it was her time to shine. With an excited glint in her eye, she took a deep breath in through her nose, but I immediately stopped her with a wave of my hand and an awkward chuckle. Even in a humongous space like this, the Level 5000 Nemumu would likely take only an hour or so to find the stairs. It was an amazing ability without a doubt, but an hour was still more time than I was willing to expend. Plus, it was completely unnecessary to waste all that time as I had an Unlimited Gacha card in my possession that could pinpoint the location of the stairs almost instantly and guide us toward them. I’d chosen to head deep into the woods, away from curious onlookers, so we could use it without attracting unwanted attention.

“Nemumu, I know you’re eager, but I want to use my SSR Clairvoyance to find the stairs,” I told her.

“Forgive me, Lord, for being so impulsive.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I said. “I’m glad you’re so enthusiastic about the mission.”

“Lord Dark!” Nemumu cried after a pregnant pause. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were moist with tears, and her body was trembling. It appeared she was beside herself with joy at receiving praise from me. Gold—who was pointedly ignoring Nemumu’s rather predictable conduct—turned his attention to what was in my hand.

“Hullo,” he said in mild surprise. “I don’t believe I’ve seen *that* card before. And you say this card is going to help us find the stairs, old bean?”

“Yeah, this is the SSR Clairvoyance, but…” My hesitation was due to the fact that, while the user of the card would be able to discover the location of any far-off thing they desired to seek out and get a real-time look at it, if their request was too vague, or if they didn’t know what the specific thing looked like, or if the object was too far away, they wouldn’t see anything.

“What a splendidly convenient card to have at one’s disposal, milord. You never cease to astonish me with the number of aces you have up your sleeve. Well, not that I expect anything less from my master!” Gold rounded off his praise with his standard belly laugh.

“It’s convenient when it *works*. There are a bunch of annoying limitations to this card. I can’t say it’s *completely* foolproof,” I said, emphasizing my statement with a shrug of the shoulders, imitating Gold’s trademark gesture. “Okay, here goes. SSR Clairvoyance—release!”

On activating the card, I closed my eyes and imagined the stairway—at which point, I was granted a vision of the furthest edge of this nature scene, a long way from the forest we were in. The view automatically transitioned to the interior of a cave on the side of a mountain, which looked for all the world like a dead end, and in this cave was the stairwell. Almost as soon as I caught a glimpse of the stairs, the Clairvoyance card disappeared from my hand.

“Okay, I’ve found the stairs,” I said, before relaying the location of the staircase to the second floor to Gold and Nemumu. “Good thing they’re someplace easy to spot. Let’s hurry and move on to the second floor.”

“Yes, it’s jolly good news that we can find this place so easily,” Gold remarked.

“And if we go there in the same manner that we winged our way to this city, the journey will be over in no time!”

It was a long, long way from my village to the city this dungeon was in. Normally, it would’ve taken two or three months to cover the distance, first by boat down the river, then by horse-drawn carriage, but instead, we’d used the SSR Conceal card and the SR Flight card in tandem to fly to the city, landing nearby without anyone seeing us. With those cards in hand, we would literally reach the staircase in a single bound.

“So you’d already thought that far ahead when you chose to walk over to these woods?” Nemumu said in awe. “You’re amazing, Lord Dark! Your judgment is as flawless as always!”

“Thanks, Nemumu. Now, let’s get a move on.” I was flattered by her words, but the adulation made me blush, so I immediately used the cards to distract from my embarrassment. “SSR Conceal, SR Flight—release!”

The Conceal card first made us impervious to detection by all five senses, magic powers, or by any magical item. The Flight card, as the name suggested, allowed us to fly for 24 hours. All you had to do was wish really hard to fly, and then your body would become light and float up into the air. Then, after reaching a certain altitude, you just had to think which way you wanted to fly and you’d soar off in that direction.

“What a marvelous view, milord!” Gold said once we’d taken flight. “I have to tip my hat to you and your powers, old boy! I bet nobody on the surface world has ever laid their peepers on a view quite like this one!”

“I hate admitting it when you’re right, Gold, but unless you can turn yourself into a bird or a dragon, you’d never be able to see a view like this,” said Nemumu. “The trip to the surface world was well worth it just for this, even if we are still in a dungeon. I’m so glad we were summoned by you, Lord Dark.”

“I’m glad you two are happy,” I said. “Now, let’s keep going until we get to those stairs to the second floor.”

And with that, I soared away in the direction of the staircase to the second floor with my two companions in tow. During the flight, we feasted our eyes on the scenic view below us, taking in the rivers, forests, mountains, and the sight

of adventurers traveling on foot, battling monsters as they went.

Chapter 4: Growth Limit

A shrill porcine shriek echoed around the furthest corner of the dungeon's first floor. An orc with a club in its hand swung wildly at a hooded adventurer, who had engaged the creature at close quarters—so close, in fact, he only just managed to dodge the blows aimed at him. The adventurer circled around the orc and struck its unguarded back with his two-handed broadsword, making the beast squeal in surprise. Normally, an orc's thick subcutaneous fat, tough sinews, and strong bones made it virtually impervious to swords, but this particular broadsword sliced effortlessly through the monster as if it were made of wet paper. The blade sliced its way down from the orc's right shoulder to its left hip, causing the shocked beast to scream in pain before it went lifeless. As for the swordsman, the force of the blow unseated his hood to reveal the face of a male elf.

He seemed to be a young adult with hair the color of honey that was tied at the end, green eyes that shimmered like emeralds, and long pointed ears that peeked out between flaxen locks. His facial features and the look in his eye were undoubtedly intimidating, but from his overall visage, he could easily have been mistaken for a female elf—though that was true of pretty much all youthful-looking male elves.

“And that makes ten,” the elf said as he activated his stats screen without bothering to fix his hood or even look down at the bloodied orc corpses at his feet. He wiped the sweat from his brow, and—completely ignoring the smell rising from the carnage he had wrought—peered into the stats screen with narrow, nearly triangular eyes. His expression turned to one of frustration as he realized his hopes had been misplaced. “Dammit! These creatures were too weak to raise my level!”

The stats screen read: Kyto, 200 years old, Elf, Male, Level 1500. The last number made Kyto angrily grind his teeth together. Was a level of 1500 really so low that it would make anyone gnash their teeth in annoyance? No, of course not. Any reasonable person would tell you that this level was abnormally

high. It was believed that elves, dark elves, dragonutes, and demonkin typically maxed out at around Level 1000, though there were plenty of variables that went into that estimate. Kyto was fairly young in elf terms, yet he had already attained an exceptionally high power level of 1500. Even then, Kyto still found his current power level unacceptable. So much so, in fact, that he thrust his broadsword into the ground in exasperation. The tallest member of his party—a dark elf named Yanaaq—lowered his hood and attempted to calm Kyto down.

“I suggest you relax, Mr. Kyto. Our primary goal is to fight the trolls on the third floor, remember? We shouldn’t be wasting our time with these orcs. Let’s make our way to the next level of the dungeon.”

Yanaaq had long blond hair, tanned skin, and wore a monocle over his right eye. Although he was roughly 180 cm tall, he was slender and less muscular than Kyto. Like most other dark elves, Yanaaq’s facial features made him look a bit like a shady scientist.

“Yes, I know that!” Kyto protested. “But I have the blood of a hero—of a Master! Yet, for all we know, I might’ve hit my growth limit at 1500! You can’t expect me to just calm down!”

At this point, you might be asking what a growth limit is. The term commonly refers to a specific power level a person cannot surpass. This figure is usually 100 for humans, 200 to 300 for beastfolk and centaurs, 500-700 for dwarves and onifolk, 300-1000 for demonkin, and 1000 for elves, dark elves, and dragonutes. These are rough estimates, however, not absolutes. And it seemed like, for Kyto, the idea of hitting his growth limit wounded his pride deeply.

“I’m the youngest elf to enter the White Knights of the Elven Queendom, and I’m next in line to lead the order,” he continued. “I’m the future legendary hero! And yet...”

Ever since Kyto was young, he’d been able to increase his power level quickly, and he’d excelled at swordsmanship, horse riding, and academics, as well as military tactics and strategizing. Kyto had been both physically and academically gifted, and from a young age, everyone had anticipated a bright future for him. Every single person in Kyto’s life lionized him, and he tended to attract a number of hangers-on. As a result of his achievements, Kyto habitually sang his

own praises and developed the arrogant attitude of looking down on his fellow elves. Nobody said anything about it though, because he always backed up his words with his feats.

As Kyto said, he had been the youngest person ever to be ennobled as a White Knight in the Elven Queendom, and he'd also been regarded as a leading candidate to one day take over as the leader of the order. But the merest hint that Kyto might have reached his growth limit at Level 1500 had brought his glory days to an abrupt end. His hangers-on had deserted him and turned on him in waves, and the same thing had happened with the more senior White Knights, who'd once had high hopes for Kyto.

"What presumptive commander of the White Knights hits his growth limit that soon?"

"He's only at half the power level of the current leader, yet that clown acted like he owned everything."

"I've always hated him. He thinks he's better than everyone else, and all you ever hear from him is the same self-congratulatory prattle."

"I know, right? He's so full of himself that if you point out one tiny mistake he's made, he flies into a fit of rage. He goes red in the face and starts screaming about how *you're* the 'incompetent' one. He's just the worst."

"He got all our hopes up for a measly power level of 1500. And he calls *us* incompetent? Ha!"

"He has no clue that swarms of people hate his guts. Take my colleagues, for instance—"

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut! Up!" The taunts Kyto had overheard prior to setting out from the queendom rang in his ears once again, like hallucinations come to life. Kyto struck the ground repeatedly with his broadsword, as if attempting to cut down the unseen speakers of these phantom jeers. On seeing Kyto recalling the insults that had been aimed at him, Yanaaq was quick to give smarmy, unctuous reassurances in a voice worthy of any con artist.

"Mr. Kyto, believe me, I understand your disappointment as if it were my

own. As you well know, my people were intolerant of my research and forced me to flee my homeland. I want to help you, Mr. Kyto, which is why I suggest we proceed directly to the third floor.”

Yanaaq completely ignored the crazed vibes exuding from Kyto and made sure to keep a winning smile firmly affixed to his face. Yanaaq’s intervention took the edge off Kyto’s anger, and the elf clicked his tongue.

“Fine, you win,” he said. “We’ll head to the third floor. And once we get there, you’d better complete this ‘research’ of yours and help me level up!”

“Yes, understood. We have linked hands as brothers-in-arms with common interests. I do trust scruples won’t enter into it over what becomes of my research,” Yanaaq said, continuing to smile at Kyto in the same way a scientist smiles at a lab rat. The smile thoroughly creeped Kyto out, but for the sake of his own interests, he pulled his sword out of the ground and plodded off toward the third floor.

Dammit! I’m descended from a legendary Master! People are supposed to recognize and worship me as a hero someday! So why am I forced to quest in this dungeon, and with a dark elf no less? Is this the Goddess testing me? Does that mean if I can level up past 1500, the Goddess will bless me as a true legendary hero? Is that what type of test this is?

Kyto continued on with this self-serving train of thought in silence. And if the Goddess does bestow the title of hero on me, I will go back to my nation and slaughter everyone who’s ever made fun of me! I’ll kill that golden eyesore too, and the rest of those inferior insects who talked down to me this morning!

Kyto recalled the events of that morning, the memories of it fueling his anger and his thirst for blood.

They dare tell me not to cut in line?! Who do they think I am?! I’m Kyto, the hero who will soon be recognized by the Goddess herself! All those human insects are good for is serving the elves as footrests! Yet they deign to disrespect me? If it hadn’t been for that issue with the Grandius sword, I would’ve sliced those inferiors up right there on the spot! I would’ve ended the lives of those miserable insects in seconds!

Kyto suddenly backed down on the idea of massacring all three of the humans

who had challenged him. *No, wait. I wouldn't want that silver-haired woman to go to waste. She may be an inferior, but her beauty would be unrivaled back in the queendom. In her case, I'll make her my special attendant. I can always get rid of her once I get tired of her or if she ever becomes ugly. And she'll be serving the future legendary hero of the elves, so she's sure to weep tears of joy at the prospect.*

Kyto really did believe deep in his heart that the silver-haired woman, Nemumu, would cry tears of gratitude and embrace him if he put this offer to her. And this conclusion wasn't actually a product of Kyto's self-aggrandizing delusions, because elves of either sex were known to be particularly beautiful, so it was common for elves to believe that any human would instantly jump at the chance to consort with them. Nemumu's exquisite beauty far surpassed anything Kyto had seen in his life up until this point, and he couldn't help himself imagining her tightly embracing him and whispering sweet nothings in his ear. This flight of fancy effectively extinguished Kyto's red-hot fury.

"Oh, for pity's sake," he said to himself. "Why would the Goddess put me through this silly little test just because I'm destined to be a hero?"

"Hm? Did you say something, Mr. Kyto?" Yanaaq asked.

"Oh, ignore me," Kyto said as they carried on trudging through the far reaches of the dungeon. Passing this "trial" from the Goddess that he'd completely made up was the thing that was keeping him going. Yanaaq, on the other hand, was largely focused on furthering his "research" on this trip.



"Hey, aren't those the adventurers from this morning?"

We'd just finished our first day of questing in the dungeon, having made it all the way to the third floor with the help of my Conceal and Flight cards. On the second floor, we'd defeated a horde of golems, and on the third floor, we'd vanquished a band of trolls. We'd collected magical gems from both groups of foes before taking flight again and heading back in the direction of the outside world. We'd had the chance to take more stuff from the golems and trolls, but that would've involved storing them in our Item Boxes, and as very few people actually owned magical Item Boxes, revealing that all *three* of us had one

would've drawn unwanted attention. Having our Item Boxes seized by the kingdom wouldn't do anything to help us raise our ranks.

I'd considered taking the materials the monsters had on them back to the Abyss, but the Unlimited Gacha was already pumping out cards anyway, so I wasn't exactly lacking in resources. Not to mention, items won by defeating trolls were of such low quality they'd only get in the way, so we decided to just take back the magical gems as proof that we'd reached the second and third floors.

We were back on the first floor of the dungeon, flying straight for the main entrance, when we spotted three green blobs emerging from a wooded area. Those blobs—likely goblins—seemed to be fighting with a group of young human kids—the same party who'd thanked us that morning for chewing out the line jumpers. I directed Gold and Nemumu to monitor the fight as well.

"You have some bally good eyes, milord. Those are the same young ragamuffins we came to the aid of this morning, yes?" Gold said.

"Such a low-level fight. There's no value in watching it, Lord Dark," Nemumu said.

Nemumu's assessment of the fight appeared to be correct, for the young adventurers were too focused on the goblins in front of them and paid no heed to their surroundings. The three boys were each fighting a goblin one-on-one, while the lone girl—who appeared to be the leader's kid sister—stood in the back holding a staff, ready to assist if needed. The boys likely wouldn't need any help though, since goblins were the size of kids and could easily be defeated one-on-one.

However, because everybody in the party was too focused on what was in front of them, no one noticed the bush snake creeping up on the group from behind. A bush snake bite was strong enough to temporarily paralyze its victim, and even though its venom wasn't deadly, it did leave the person completely vulnerable to any other monsters prowling around in the vicinity. It was standard practice for parties made up of low-level and intermediate members to assign one person to watch for attacks from the rear for precisely that reason.

“What’s the plan, milord?” Gold asked. “Worst case, that young lady in the back gets a nasty bite and screams her head off, distracting the lads on the frontline and leaving them wide open to be massacred by those goblins.”

“I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if I let that happen,” I said. “I think I’ll go intervene, just this once.”

I descended to the ground with my Conceal card still activated so that I wouldn’t be noticed by the young fighters or their enemies, and as soon as I landed, I crushed the bush snake’s neck with my staff. Once I was satisfied the creature was well and truly dead, Nemumu and Gold joined me on the ground.

“Good job, guys! We defeated the goblins,” the red-haired leader said, congratulating his party. “Now let’s gather up their gems before any other monsters show—” He stopped abruptly and blinked. “Huh? Aren’t you the boy from this morning?”

Every teenager in the party gasped in surprise when they saw us lurking behind them without making so much as a sound or giving them some kind of warning of our presence. The leader’s little sister was so shocked, she took a step back, away from us.

“While it’s a sound basic strategy to give the enemy in front of you most of your attention, don’t forget that not all enemies come at you from the front,” I said. “If you don’t watch your rear, you might end up losing your life. See?”

Grinning sheepishly, I used my staff to hoist up the dead bush snake to show to the teenagers. On seeing it, the party instantly realized the full extent of the danger they had been in, and not for the first time, their leader bowed his head to me.

“Thank you so much for saving my sister. Miya, you should thank him too.”

“T-Tanks very much!” said Miya, fumbling her words slightly as she bowed her head too.

“Thanks for saving our girl Miya for us,” said the mischievous-looking boy. “But I gotta ask, when the heck did you guys show up?”

I didn’t blame the kid for wondering that. The only way we could have conceivably concealed ourselves would have been to hide in the woods the

goblins had emerged from, because everywhere else was wide-open fields. Trouble is, the young party had kept their eyes glued on the woods the whole time, so if my party had tried to approach them from the meadow, they would've heard the sound of our footsteps as we trudged over the leaves and grass, or noticed the light reflecting off of Gold's golden suit of armor. Yet on the flip side, it looked for all the world to the young party like we'd appeared out of nowhere like wraiths. I couldn't tell them about my Conceal and Flight cards, so I decided to fib my way out.

"We were just passing by. I think you were all too busy fighting to notice us approaching. Anyway, aren't you supposed to be collecting the gems?"

"Oh yeah, you're right," said the young leader. "Gimra, Wordy, hurry up and grab the gems. Miya, you stand watch."

I turned to Gold. "You should slice open the bush snake too and check if it has any gems on it."

"Right-o! Leave it to me, milord," Gold said cheerily.

In general, goblins have nothing of value on them except for magic gems. The meat from a bush snake would probably fetch a little bit of money, but it wasn't really an enticing enough amount to justify carrying it around with us, so I ordered Gold to only look for gems.

"Elio, should I?" Miya asked her brother.

"Oh, sure, go ahead, Miya. You haven't used that little trick yet today, so we should be in the clear."

Miya—who appeared to be a mage—started reciting an incantation: "Magic power, heed my call! Reveal thy shape as a water ball!"

The next moment, a large sphere of water appeared in midair. Even though it was fairly basic water magic Miya had performed, this ability ensured the party would never go thirsty while questing in a dungeon. Mages that could perform this trick were highly sought after. Her brother, Elio, offered the water to Gold.

"Mr. Knight, you can use the water to wash the blood and stuff off your hands," he said.

“Oh, thank you kindly, son,” Gold said appreciatively.

“No, thank *you* for saving my sister,” the boy with red hair said. “It’s a small token of our appreciation.”

“Hey, Miya, let us get in on that!” said Gimra.

The wise-cracking kid and Wordy—who was the tallest member of their party—joined Gold in sticking their hands into the giant ball of water to wash off the goblin and bush snake blood. A mage using up some of her precious mana to give us water just to wash our hands in the middle of a dungeon was no small gesture, so I felt the need to show them my appreciation for their generosity.

“Thank you for using up the little mana you have to give us water,” I said to the party of youths.

“No, really, thank *you* for saving my sister,” Elio said. “Not only did you help us out here, you also came to our aid this morning. I have no words to express my gratitude.”

“We were also victims of those line cutters this morning,” I replied. “And seriously, I just happened to notice your party was in trouble as we were passing, so I helped out, knowing I wouldn’t be able to bear to turn a blind eye to the danger creeping up on you. I probably should’ve called out to you guys, but you were all busy fighting those goblins, so I took it on myself to intervene.”

“I really appreciate your concern,” said Elio.

“Lord Dark,” Nemumu chimed in. “It looks like there are enemies coming our way.”

As this was my Level 5000 tracker speaking, I had to heed her warning. I cut short my conversation with Elio to take a look around, and immediately sensed a large mass emerging from the nearby forest and going much faster than these teens could run. The large mass let out a guttural growl as it got closer.

“Wait, is that...” Elio started. “Is that a great bush wolf?” A large wolf around two meters in length and the color of grass burst out of the woods, followed by other bush wolves close behind it.

“What are *they* doing in these parts?!” Elio exclaimed. “I thought their

territory was deeper in the dungeon!” He hastily turned to his party and started issuing orders. “We can’t fight these creatures. We have to fall back! Mr. Knight, do you think you and your party could help us retreat?”

“The bush wolves aren’t the real enemy,” I said. “They won’t attack us. They’re just running away.”

“Huh?”

As I predicted, the great bush wolf and the other wolves didn’t pay us any heed as they ran full tilt past us and off into the meadows. The creature following the wolves was on the large side, and trees fell and the ground shuddered with every step it took. The beast was so big, even Elio and his party noticed it approaching. It eventually emerged from the woods and revealed itself to be a giant, four-armed praying mantis. It must have been a good three meters high at the very least, and the sight of it shocked Elio even more than the bush wolves had.

“A Fourscythe Mantis?!” he cried out in terror.

“You know what that is?” I asked.

“I-I’m the party leader, so it was my job to look up what types of monsters might show up on the first floor. The Fourscythe Mantis is really rare, only appearing about once every thirty years or so. You don’t often see a monster this powerful roaming around on the first floor, so when the guild confirms a sighting of it, all the adventurers in town team up to hunt it. But the last such hunt was only ten years ago, so this is way too early for another one to appear!”

I used my Appraisal power to scan the mantis, and it was indeed a Level 500 monster—much too powerful for the first floor of this dungeon. When I was with the Concord of the Tribes, I’d heard that certain dungeons occasionally spat out high-powered monsters that were totally out of place for the floor they were on. I’d also heard that, in dungeons like that, it had become more important to figure out strategies to avoid these monsters, rather than trying to tackle them head on.

This Fourscythe Mantis might be one of those monsters, I thought, before Elio’s urgent voice pulled me out of my reminiscing.

“M-Miya, hit it with your secret weapon!” Elio shouted. “Mr. Knight, once Miya’s slowed it down, you and the others bolt for the exit!”

“O-Okay, brother!” Miya said, Elio’s command making her grip her staff tightly. I was curious to find out what Miya’s secret weapon was, not least because the Fourscythe Mantis had legs as thick as tree trunks and its exoskeleton had a sheen to it that suggested it was tougher than steel armor. Thanks to its bulky legs, the mantis was able to move faster than its huge frame would imply it could. Even if Miya were to give this hulking great monster a moment’s pause, her party still wouldn’t be able to outrun it.

By this point, the Fourscythe Mantis had stopped chasing the bush wolves and had turned its attention toward us. I assumed that, if it decided to give chase, it would be relentless in its pursuit of us, just like your average dungeon monster was. The mantis’s head rotated in our direction and it was clear it had registered us as prey. The creature rubbed its mandibles together and let out a grating, staccato trill of a screech. Miya started sobbing softly with fright at the intimidating dirge coming out of the mantis, and Elio and the other boys all shrank back. But I had other ideas.

“If you guys are falling back, that means you’re not going to fight it, right? So we can battle it, yeah?”

“Sure, if you want to,” said Elio. “But that thing’s a Fourscythe Mantis!”

“It’s fine. Nothing to worry about,” I said airily. Me and my team had become adventurers to gain fame, so we couldn’t just let this golden opportunity pass us by. Plus, Elio had just given us permission to take it on in his party’s stead.

“Gold, Nemumu,” I said to my companions. “We’re taking this mantis down.”

“Yes, sir, Lord Dark!” Nemumu said.

“You’re really going to fight that *monster*?!” Elio cried. “That thing’s stronger than any of the final bosses you can find on all seven floors! All the adventurers in the city banded together to kill the last Fourscythe Mantis that appeared! Do you seriously think you three stand a chance against it?!”

Gold threw back his head and laughed. “There is no need to take leave of your senses, young fellow-m’lad! For us, this type of monster isn’t even worth

writing home about! In fact, I'll take this opportunity to show you sprouts some proper sword and shield work in battle!"

Gold unslung his shield and drew his sword from its scabbard as Elio's party looked on in astonishment. The golden knight marched forward and took up a position that made him the closest person to the screeching mantis.

"M-Mr. Knight! Look out!" Elio yelled.

The Fourscythe Mantis's four arms resembled giant sickles, and they all scythed rapidly through the air, creating a whirlwind of appendages. A blow from any one of those razor-sharp blades on its arms looked capable of easily ripping through any metal shield or armor.

"I saw you lads taking the fight to those goblins," Gold yelled over. "You used your shields to protect yourselves and your blades to attack, like so!"

Gold effortlessly parried the strikes from the Fourscythe Mantis using both his shield and sword, all while his face was turned in the direction of Elio's party as he gave them pointers.

"Protecting yourself with a shield and attacking with a sword isn't *necessarily* wrong, but it's not quite the *correct* approach either, what? After all, there's no rule saying it can't be vice-versa. Take *this*, for instance!"

Gold swung his golden shield around in an arc, timed perfectly to connect with one of the mantis's descending blade-arms. Unable to absorb the shock of the impact, the blade on the mantis's arm shattered, leaving the monster to trill quizzically at what had just happened.

"As you can see, lads, you can strike a blow with your shield. A shield isn't only meant for protecting yourself, you see. And you shouldn't go swinging your swords around all willy-nilly either. You have to read your opponent's attacks and strike accordingly. Feast your eyes on *this*!"

This time, Gold advanced on the Fourscythe Mantis, which had hesitated momentarily due to the shattering of its blade-arm. With a swing of his sword, Gold cut through one of the mantis's legs like butter, drawing an uncharacteristic, uninterrupted scream from the mantis.

"You should also use your noggins to think of ways to annoy your opponent

and hit them with surprise attacks,” Gold said, not missing a single beat as he continued with his lecture. “You lot aren’t going to get better simply by swinging your swords like a windmill and hiding behind your shields, no matter how long you keep at it, what?”

Not one to be one-upped by Gold, I decided to join the fight too.

“Fire Arrow!” I unleashed my attack card—the R Fire Arrow—but the Fourscythe Mantis used one of its remaining blade-arms to swat away the flaming shot.

The mantis screeched. Even though Gold’s attack had taken it by surprise, the giant insect seemed to display a higher level of confidence when facing me. Slightly miffed by this, I drew thirty Fire Arrow cards to shoot at the creature this time. “Fire Arrow!”

The deafening chittering from the Fourscythe Mantis suddenly had a note of surprise in it at the firestorm I’d just unleashed. The insect found itself unable to bat away all of the Fire Arrows flying its way, and I succeeded in burning off one of its arms.

I always wanted to use magic spells when I was in the Concord of the Tribes, I thought. I’m so glad I have my Unlimited Gacha cards, because now I can pretend to be a mage.

There *were* humans who could perform sorcery, but unlike all the other races, they were few and far between. Well, all the other races except for the beastfolk and the centaurs, that is. Those races prioritized physical abilities over magic, so they had much fewer mages even than humans. This meant Elio’s party was quite an unusual case among rookie adventurers because they had an actual mage on their team, even if the main reason she was in the party was because she was related to the leader.

“Oh! Oh my gosh!” Miya, the mage in question, whispered in astonishment as she marveled at my attack. “He’s only around my age, but he already knows how to use combat class magic without reciting the spells! And on top of that, he can fire off thirty blasts all at once...”

Ordinarily, one needed to concentrate hard and recite spells in order to use magic, in much the same way Miya had done earlier, though a skilled veteran

could perform non-verbal magic. The fact I was able to non-verbally fire off thirty Fire Arrows in short order, even though I looked practically the same age as her, was frankly unbelievable to Miya.

Finding itself down two blade arms and a leg, the Fourscythe Mantis sensed it didn't stand a chance against us, and attempted to make its escape, chittering loudly with anxiety as it did so.

"You're trying to run away because you know you can't win?" I asked. "Y'know, you're surprisingly smart for a bug."

Despite having lost a leg, the Fourscythe Mantis was making a pretty speedy getaway. But I wasn't going to let our valuable quarry scurry away that easy.

"Firewall!" I unleashed my SR Firewall card to entrap the giant mantis, eliciting a confused screech from the creature.

"No way!" Miya yelled. "You can use tactical class magic without vocalizing the spell too?!"

"M-Miya?" Elio said.

Before this moment, I hadn't seen Miya so much as raise her voice, not even once, but after my latest attack, she had such an astonished look on her face, her eyes seemed on the verge of popping out of their sockets. This appeared to be unusual behavior for her since it caused her brother to turn his attention away from Gold's swordplay and toward her. Me and my team continued to focus purely on the fight.

"Nemumu!" I shouted.

"Allow me, Lord Dark!" Nemumu drew her knives and dashed toward the Fourscythe Mantis, which had been completely immobilized by the Firewall. She kicked off from the ground and leaped the last three meters, straight toward the creature's head. "Be grateful you're giving Lord Dark a leg up. Now die!"

Nemumu furiously slashed away with her knives, as if my performance and Gold's—as well as the fact there was a young audience watching—had encouraged her to show us what she was made of. She roared a battle cry as she rained down blows on the creature. The Fourscythe Mantis's steely arms and exoskeleton were no match for Nemumu's blades of fury. When she landed

back on the ground, the deed done, the Fourscythe Mantis crumbled into several dozen chunks of insect flesh. Gold sighed in disappointment at the sight.

“Hey, Gold! Lord Dark told *me* to take care of that oversized grasshopper!” Nemumu admonished him. “Be jealous all you like, but you don’t have to start moaning like some drama queen! You’re only embarrassing Lord Dark!”

“Ponder on what you just did, m’girl,” Gold retorted. “The mantis’s blades and exoskeleton fetch the highest price at market, but you diced them up into blinkin’ tiny pieces! Now we’ve got nothing to sell.”

“Oh no...” Nemumu said, suddenly realizing what she’d done. “L-Lord Dark, forgive me!”

I laughed, genuinely amused. “Oh well. Not much we can do with damaged goods, is there? Anyway, me and Gold can’t blame you too much, because between us, we destroyed one of its legs and two of its arms.”

“L-Lord Dark...” Nemumu croaked, her eyes welling up with tears as my “name” passed her lips. As my team and I engaged in our usual comedy routine, Miya excitedly grabbed Elio’s shoulders and rocked him back and forth.

“Brother! Brother! Did you see that?” she said excitedly. “That human boy’s my age, but he’s able to use combat class magic and Firewall without vocalizing the spells for them! Firewall’s a low-level tactical class spell, but it’s still amazing!”

“Calm down, Miya,” Elio said. “Is it really that big a deal?”

“Of course it is!” she replied. “Elves, dark elves, demons, and dragonutes might be able to do those things as they get older, but I’ve never heard of a *human* who can use non-verbal tactical magic! We’re standing in front of a legend in magic history!”

“For real? Miya, are you serious about that ‘magic history’ stuff?” asked Gimra.

“I am! I am! I am! He’s like a hero! Or a champion!” Miya, a girl whose taciturn personality wouldn’t usually allow for her to repeat words in rapid succession, was gazing intently at me, her eyes visibly twinkling.

Nemumu giggled triumphantly at Miya's assessment. "Glad to see *someone's* smart enough to recognize how wonderful and amazing Lord Dark is."

I chuckled modestly at Nemumu's complete one-eighty from tear-filled gratitude to vainglorious pride on my behalf. Her behavior was so adorable, I couldn't help but be tickled by it, even if it did make me feel somewhat uncomfortable at the same time.

"Yes, yes, we *know* you're happy that our lord is being showered with praise by other folk," Gold said, unimpressed. "But getting too giddy over it will bally well draw more enemies toward us if we're not careful, what? Now, stop puffing out that scrawny chest of yours and help me find this ruddy gem, plus whatever else there might be in the way of useful material, so we can be on our merry way."

"I-I know that, dammit!" Nemumu said, annoyed. "And I do *not* have a scrawny chest!"

"Oh, Nemumu," Gold said with mock pity in his voice. "You most certainly do, m'girl."

Nemumu, her face beet-red, banged her fists on Gold's back, but he ignored her and continued gathering up the magical gem and whatever useful parts of the Fourscythe Mantis he could find that were still intact. Sympathizing with Gold's sense of urgency, I joined in with the task.

"Um, we'd like to help too," Elio said. "To show our thanks."

"We appreciate it," I replied. "Please, dive right in." Thanks to the help of Elio's party, we finished looting the corpse in less than ten minutes and left the area before any more creatures or bad guys showed up.



Not long after we'd left what remained of the Fourscythe Mantis, Elio put a suggestion to us.

"Night's closing in, so we're going to set up camp," he said. "It's dangerous to wander about at night, and we want to thank you again for saving us from the bush snake and that Fourscythe Mantis. We can only offer you some food and a pretty basic tent, but we'd like you all to camp with us tonight."

“You’re right about us saving you from the bush snake, but we were the ones who decided to take on that Fourscythe Mantis, remember?” I replied.

“Oh, and we also wanted to thank you for this morning. And there’s another thing too...” Elio trailed off and stole a glance at his sister, who was still gazing at me with a glint in her eye. “My sister really wants to talk with you about magic, so please, I insist you camp with us.”

I giggled. “Okay, I’ll take you up on your offer.”

Elio couldn’t say no to his sister, and I totally understood how that felt—even if it *was* something of a painful reminder—so I accepted his invitation without reservation.

We set up the tent Elio’s party had brought with them and helped to build a simple stove out of handily-shaped stones. While all this was going on, both parties were properly introduced to each other. We found out that Gimra and Wordy were childhood friends of Elio and Miya from their hometown, and apart from their mage, Miya, the rest of the boys were fighters who wielded swords and shields. When we asked them why *all* the boys were frontline fighters, they all replied as one. “Because being a knight is awesome!”

“Oh-ho, is that right, m’lads?” Gold said wryly. My team felt Elio’s crew should have a better balance of roles, but it wasn’t our place to stick our noses into the affairs of other parties.

Miya produced water with her magic again, and we boiled some dried meat and vegetables with a little salt in a pot. While the food was cooking, Miya and I chatted about magic. Or rather, I fed Miya a totally made-up story about my background that didn’t include any mention of my dominion over the Abyss, since I couldn’t reveal my *true* story just yet.

“So both your parents were mages?” Miya said. “No wonder you’re so super-talented.”

“I think it’s amazing you are able to use magic at your age, Miya,” I said.

“I could never compare to you, Dark,” Miya replied. “I can’t use tactical class magic, let alone non-verbal spells.”

There were basically three classes of magic: combat, tactical, and strategic.

Roughly speaking, the three classes escalated in terms of scale and power in that order, and these types of magic encompassed attack spells, protection spells, healing spells, and support spells. Raising one's power level opened the door to learning magic—if one had the potential for it—and a seasoned veteran could even cast unvoiced spells, though it took a lot of grueling effort to attain that particular skill. Each of the classes contained lower-level, intermediate, and high-level spells. The SR Firewall I used was considered a low-level tactical class spell.

To get even more specific on the different classes, combat class magic consisted of magical spells any mage could cast by themselves. These included Fire Arrows, Ice Arrows, and other attack spells along those lines. The spellcaster could either be biased toward learning certain attacks or they could end up deploying a wide range of attacks. It was typically believed that mages biased toward more specialized attacks were more successful.

Tactical class magic generally referred to spells that had a wide area of effect. Only elite mages were able to use this class of magic, and almost no human was capable of reaching this particular echelon of magic. However, dragonutes, elves, dark elves, and demons were easily able to attain the ability to use these spells.

Strategic class magic was regarded as the sorcery of “last resort,” and its spells often had a wider area of effect than tactical magic. Some of its spells could cause a meteorite to fall, create a giant tidal wave, or even trigger an earthquake that had the potential to split a land mass in two. This class of magic called for multiple mages to chant spells in unison and combine powers, and not only did this particular category require high-level competence, performing spells of that magnitude was highly taxing. Even races renowned for their magical abilities rarely performed strategic class magic.

Ellie, my magic teacher, is capable of performing ultimate class magic: a level of sorcery that exceeds even strategic magic, I thought. Nobody knows about this fourth class of magic, and Ellie told me not to mention it up here on the surface world.

Ultimate magic could raise the dead (though there were a lot of hoops you had to jump through to satisfy all the conditions to perform the spell), could

summon an angel of the Goddess, and could create portals to other dimensions. But even the Forbidden Witch, Ellie, could only use that type of magic once a day. I myself had made it to Level 9999 by using ultimate class magic. *Man, was it ever hard to level up*, I thought.

While I was wrapped up in my wistful musings, Elio stroked Miya's head consolingly. "I don't know much about magic, but you're talented enough to get a recommendation to the School of Magic in the Duchy. I'm sure you'll be able to use tactical magic someday, so cheer up."

"B-Brother! Don't do that! You'll muss up my hair!" Miya exclaimed as she squirmed away from Elio's hand, clearly embarrassed by his display of affection.

The "Duchy" referred to the Principality of the Nine, a nation created through a joint investment by all nine races—though in reality, the dragonutes ran the Duchy and treated it like their colony, which perhaps went some way to explaining why the dragonutes called their homeland the "Dragonute Empire." But the Duchy was regarded as one of the most prosperous nations in the world, and it seemed that representatives of the nine races gathered there once every few years to hold meetings and make important decisions. The School of Magic in the Duchy was considered one of the best in the world by those who studied magic, so Miya getting a recommendation to that institution showed she was indeed gifted.

"But our parents died in an epidemic, so we didn't have any money to send her there," Elio explained. "On top of that, she had to quit her old school because we couldn't afford the tuition. So the two of us formed a party with our two friends and started questing. I hope to make enough money on these quests to send Miya to the School of Magic in the Duchy."

Miya was thirteen, Elio was fifteen. The common belief was that it was better to learn magic at a young age. It wouldn't be *totally* impossible to make up for a gap of a few years in your training, but it'd still be a painful hit to overcome.

"Hey, boss, that's supposed to be the dream of *all* of us, ain't it?" Gimra grinned, and Wordy nodded silently.

"Just being here with you guys is all I could ever ask," Miya said to the three boys. "So you don't have to go overboard on my account."

“I hear you. We’ll keep it sensible,” said Elio, before rubbing his sister’s head again.



This time, Miya didn't seem to mind her brother's touch as much. Elio broke the silence of this touching moment by changing the conversation to ask about my team.

"So why did you all decide to become adventurers?" he asked.

"Well, Nemumu and I owed much to milord's parents, you see," Gold explained. "His mum and dad died in a fire, and Dark's face was terribly burned in the tragic blaze too. We're on this quest in search of a special potion that will sort out that scar on his face. We also became adventurers so that milord could see the world and gain some experience."

Like clockwork, Gold reeled off the backstory we'd come up with beforehand just in case anyone asked us about my past on this mission. Thanks to the power of my Fool's Mask, I was able to create the illusion of having a terribly burned face, which in turn gave me a reasonable explanation for why I always wore a mask.

Gimra stuck his hand in the air. "Ooh! Ooh! I've got a question! Is Miss Nemumu Mr. Gold's girlfriend?"

Like a typical teenage girl, Miya's eyes gleamed with anticipation at the prospect of talking about romance. Wordy also seemed to perk up at the question, though he did so in complete silence. For reference, we'd told Elio's party that I was twelve, Nemumu was eighteen and Gold was in his late twenties.

A remarkably nauseated look passed over Nemumu's face at Gimra's question, as if someone was forcing her to eat a thousand stink beetles. "I don't have anything to do with this walking garbage can! He's too loutish, flashy, tacky, *and* brainless! He's *totally* not my type!"

Gold—who was sitting next to Nemumu—guffawed vociferously at the exchange. "And for my part, I don't go in for girls who are as flat as ironing boards. Sorry to break it to you, love, but I prefer the more *mature* woman—the type that looks good in gold!"

Her face going red, Nemumu turned and whacked Gold repeatedly on the shoulders. "Wh-Who're you calling 'flat'?! I'm normal-sized, dammit!"

Gold's reply fascinated me so much, I completely ignored Nemumu's antics. "Wow, I never knew that was your type, Gold."

"Mhm. It's not as if I was *intentionally* keeping it to myself, but I didn't see it as anything to crow about, old chap."

"Miss Nemumu, what if I asked you to be my girlfriend?" Gimra interjected.

"I would refuse," Nemumu replied soberly. "I have sworn a solemn duty to protect and serve Lord Dark."

That answer caused Miya to look at me and Nemumu with eyes that were sparkling even more than before. "So this is age gap love. It's so wonderful."

Even though we were sitting quite close to each other, Nemumu and I didn't have that kind of relationship, but before we could correct the record, Gold roared with laughter and waved his hand dismissively. "No fear! Perish the thought! Milord is far too good for a washboard like her!"

"For the last time, I'm normal-sized, you flashy buffoon!" Nemumu got to her feet, unsheathed her knives, and bashed Gold's helmet with the hilts. But it didn't bother Gold in the slightest, whose belly laughs continued for quite some time. Elio, on the other hand, was taken aback by the scene and turned to me to apologize.

"I-I'm so sorry! I didn't expect my party to be so rude!" he said hurriedly.

"Oh, don't worry about it," I said. "I should be the one apologizing for my party of loudmouths." While we were offering our mutual apologies, the food finished cooking.

Night fell almost as soon as we'd finished eating. There was only one tent, which Elio offered to us since we were their guests. It didn't seem right to monopolize the tent though, so I proposed we take turns keeping watch. The first rotation would see me sleeping in the tent with Nemumu while Elio and Miya slept outside and Gimra and Wordy kept watch. Sometime later, Elio and Miya would switch places with Gimra and Wordy. The last rotation would see me and Nemumu taking over from Elio and Miya and letting them take the tent for the rest of the night.

Gold would serve as the third person on watch for all three rotations. "I can

stay awake for at least two or three days without breaking a sweat, so I will stay up all night tonight!” Gold had announced.

Chapter 5: Prejudice

The night passed without incident, and the darkness slowly melted away as dawn usurped it. We didn't want to impose on Elio's party any further, so my team and I insisted on leaving before breakfast. While we felt we had to depart the dungeon at this juncture, the kids had decided to stay for another two or three days to fight goblins.

"If the chance ever arises, let's quest in the dungeon together again," said Elio. "I'd really like it if Mr. Gold could teach us some more about how to wield a sword and shield correctly."

"Of course," I replied. "I look forward to hanging out with you guys again someday." Elio and I shook hands to make the promise official, then my party and I headed toward the dungeon's exit.

When we were a good distance away from Elio's party—and having made sure that nobody was watching—I activated the SSR Conceal and SR Flight cards once more. The three of us reached the exit in under an hour, at which point we caught sight of the throngs of adventurers streaming into the dungeon, far outnumbering the ones leaving it this early in the morning. Thanks to this imbalance, we managed to walk out of the dungeon without hassle and without having to wait around at all.

"What's the plan, milord?" Gold asked. "Are we heading back to the inn?"

"We should go to the guild first and cash in our magic gems," I said. "We don't want to be holding onto them forever."

We headed off to the guild building, walking the same route as the arriving questers except in reverse. We were last there only a day ago, when the guild had made some adventurer tags for us, and as we entered, I glanced over at the bulletin board filled with want ads for questers that took up a sizable chunk of one of the walls. One of the posters on it was seeking someone to gather ten bundles of a herb that grew on the banks of a river located on the dungeon's first floor. Another was looking for someone to fetch a particular ore that could

be found in the volcano on the fifth floor of the dungeon. Not all the notices were for the dungeon though: there were some quests that could be done inside the city, and others that would see you venturing beyond the city limits. There was certainly a wide variety of jobs an adventurer could choose from.

Even though it was still early, the guild was filled with adventurers all milling around in front of the wanted board, though that probably shouldn't have come as a surprise as these jobs were on a first-come-first-served basis, meaning there were plenty of early birds looking for the choicest picks. Of course, some adventurers made a point of ignoring the quest board entirely and just focusing on the dungeon instead.

The three of us went over to the reception desk opposite the quest board, which was basically a series of windows separated by partition walls. Perhaps it wasn't really a surprise because of the kingdom we were in, but almost all of the receptionists were dwarf women. We approached one of them.

"Good morning," the receptionist greeted us. "Are you here to accept one of the quests?"

"No, we just came from the dungeon," I said. "We'd like to cash in these magical gems."

Despite the diminutive stature of both male and female dwarves, they could never be accused of looking weak due to how solidly built they were. All through childhood, dwarves had relatively normal-looking, age-appropriate frames, but as they grew older, they gradually became stouter and stouter. The receptionist we were addressing was a little shorter than me, but her figure was probably best described as "stocky."

I handed over the bag with all the gems—including the one from the Fourscythe Mantis—we'd picked up on the first three floors of the dungeon. We'd ultimately decided against pocketing any other materials the mantis had, because they'd just take up too much space, and of course, Nemumu had sliced and diced its blade-arms and exoskeleton, the two items that would've fetched the highest prices. So in the end, we'd only taken a ball-sized gem—which felt very heavy if you tried carrying it one-handed—from the mantis's torso, and afterward, I'd used one of my magic cards to incinerate the rest of the corpse,

so that its flesh wouldn't attract any hungry monsters.

"Hm? That bag looks pretty heavy," the receptionist remarked.

"One of the gems is pretty big," I said.

"Judging by the colors, a good number of these gems are from the third floor." the receptionist said, assessing the contents of the bag. "But your party could only have entered the dungeon either yesterday or the day before. I recognize you people from when you came in to register."

"Huh? Well, yes, we started questing in the dungeon early yesterday morning," I said "Is there a problem?"

My party and I had mostly collected gems from trolls on the third floor in order to raise our ranks a bit quicker, though thinking about it back here at the guild, when I was adventuring with the Concord of the Tribes, I'd heard that some dungeons strictly forbade the overfarming of gems, as a way of propping up the exchange rates for the stones. Maybe there was a rule like that in place for this dungeon too? I seemed to be way off though, as the receptionist was eying us as if we were thieves.

"If you were any other race, a haul like this might be halfway believable, but it simply isn't possible for a group of humans to make it to the third floor—or even the second—in the space of a day, much less come back from there with this number of gems," she said sharply. "You've even stolen a gem I've never seen before. This guild doesn't pay out for gems obtained illegally, so we are exercising our right not to do business with you people."

I grimaced under my mask. The receptionist had just insinuated that it was absolutely impossible for so-called "inferior" humans to collect this many gems in a single day, therefore we *must* have committed some kind of crime to get them. We'd figured the gems we'd salvaged from the third floor and the Fourscythe Mantis would at least move us up to E-rank, maybe even D-rank, but I hadn't for one second thought that it might lead to us being accused of criminality. It just went to show the extent of the prejudice the other races had for humans.

I sensed Nemumu was about to give the receptionist a piece of her mind, so before she could open her mouth and shout the place down, I raised a hand to

signal to her that she should stand down. I managed to suppress my own anger at this outrageous treatment, and when I spoke again, my voice was quite calm.

“We can attest that we did nothing illegal in getting these gems and everything we did was above board. We quested through the dungeon, defeated some monsters, collected these gems, then came straight here. That large gem you see there, we got from defeating a Fourscythe Mantis. I assure you, we have committed no wrong.”

“A Fourscythe Mantis?” the receptionist said skeptically. “That’s an extremely rare monster that only appears once every three decades or so. The entire guild of adventurers banded together to defeat one of those creatures ten years ago, so there’s simply no way another could have reappeared so soon after. I would advise against spouting such transparent falsehoods.”

“I’m telling the truth,” I insisted. “You can have someone with the Gift of Appraisal verify the gem. And anyway, what crime do you think we might have committed to collect these gems?”

“W-Well, you *must’ve* attacked other adventurers and stolen their gems,” the receptionist said. “Or—”

“You shouldn’t make false accusations without proof,” I retorted. “We would never attack another adventurer. And we intend to re-enter the dungeon and bring back more gems, as a demonstration of what we can do.”

“More to come, you say?” she said, before thinking about the situation for a moment and tutting. “Yes, it *would* be problematic if I stated outright that you’d done something criminal without any evidence to back it up. So in accordance with the rules, I will exchange these gems for cash on *this* occasion, since no misconduct has officially been brought to light. For this so-called ‘Fourscythe Mantis gem,’ I will get someone to conduct an Appraisal, and if it is determined that it is real, you will receive the money for it within a few days. But if it is subsequently discovered that you people have committed crimes or any other illegal activities in procuring these gems, the guild shall not overlook the matter.”

Despite her undisguised suspicion, the receptionist was forced to carry out the cash exchange, because in the absence of evidence, it would be difficult for

her to refuse a transaction—though that didn’t stop her from implying that the guild would make my life a living hell if they caught even a whiff of wrongdoing.

“Yes, of course,” I replied politely. “We will continue to be upstanding, *trustworthy* adventurers who will keep our noses clean for the sake of the guild.”

The receptionist—who couldn’t have failed to pick up on my sarcasm—cashed out our gems in a somewhat brusque, careless manner, all while glaring at us and muttering something about me being a “know-it-all inferior.” But she finished up the task swiftly, and we left the building with the money in our pockets in what I considered a reasonable amount of time.



After we’d left the guild, a clearly livid Nemumu proposed a violent act of retribution. “I can’t believe how *rude* she was to you, Lord Dark. Just give me the word and I’ll remove every trace of her from this planet.”

I gave a little sigh and tried to talk some sense into her. “Nemumu, I’m happy that you’re so mad on my account, but you really should refrain from saying those kinds of things,” I told her. “If that receptionist were to disappear now, regardless of our part in it, we would be the first ones the authorities would suspect. And I’d really like to avoid any more false accusations being leveled at us.”

“P-Please forgive me!” Nemumu cried. “I failed to think ahead! It wasn’t my intent in the slightest to cause you any trouble, Lord Dark!”

“Yes, I know you meant well,” I reassured her. “But please, be a little more careful, okay?”

“Milord...” Gold murmured, the usually bombastic knight nearly whispering.

“I know,” I said, already having registered what he was trying to draw my attention to. “Nemumu, numbers.”

“Three tailing us, another two seemingly circling around to block our path,” she replied.

It hadn’t taken each of us long to realize that a group had been trailing us

since the moment we'd walked out of the guild building. Thankfully for us, the Level 5000 Assassin's Blade, Nemumu, was able to discern precisely how many were following us and how many were attempting to head us off.

"I want to know who's shadowing us," I said. "They might have some useful intelligence we can shake out of them. I want to 'bump into them' somewhere secluded. Nemumu, can you lead them by the nose, do you think?"

"With ease, Lord Dark," she said. "Don't head for the inn. Turn left at the next opportunity."

I followed Nemumu's instructions and turned onto an adjacent footpath that led us to an alleyway. Even without Nemumu's detection skills, I could tell our stalkers were frantically changing direction to stay on our tail.

"Lord Dark, one of the group of three has peeled off to join up with the group of two. I suggest slowing down and allowing them to block our path."

"Agreed. You heard her, Gold," I said.

"Right-o, milord," Gold replied, slowing his pace as Nemumu had instructed. We'd intentionally led our stalkers into this alleyway so they could trap us, and they were practically dancing to our tune. When we reached the desired spot, our stalkers showed up right on time, trapping us in the alleyway by blocking the way forward and back.

"Hold it right there, inferiors," a voice boomed from behind us. "We wanna talk to ya 'bout something."

I turned around and saw a bear-like beastman at least two and a half meters tall—who seemed to be the leader of the pack of stalkers—looming large in front of me. The group seemed to be made up entirely of beastmen, all wearing leather armor that looked shabby, but at the same time, clearly showed signs of years of use by seasoned professionals.

"I heard ya arguing with that receptionist lady back at the guild," the bearman said patronizingly. "She had every right to be suspicious of you humans. It takes our party a whole day to even get a *peek* at the second floor, but you inferiors say ya fought monsters on the third floor? Any way ya slice it, that ain't physically possible. And as for sayin' ya got that big gem by defeating a

Fourscythe Mantis... Ha!”

The bearman made a show of scoffing at the very idea before continuing explaining why he thought it was nonsense. “Every adventurer in town knows it only shows up once every thirty years or so. The last one was killed only a decade ago, so there ain’t no way one of ’em coulda turned up yet. So where’d ya pilfer that giant rock from, huh? If ya really didn’t commit a crime, then ya’d better tell us the *real* story behind that gem, and how you *inferiors* made it all the way to the third floor. C’mon, human, spill!”

“I’m afraid I must decline to answer that,” I said immediately. “A good adventurer never reveals his secrets.”

“Ya think this is a game, kid?” the bearman roared. A beastman who was half-man, half-monkey stood next to him, and stealing a glance behind me, I saw that the rest of his gang consisted of a raccoon-dogman, a foxman, and a ratman. We were all cramped into a secluded alleyway that was only just wide enough to fit two adult-sized humans standing shoulder to shoulder. In other words, it was the perfect place to beat people up.

“You should know that me and my associates here have been questing in this city for many a year now,” the bearman warned us. “That means we’re higher up the ladder than you, and seniority means everythin’ in this business. Your betters are askin’ ya politely whether ya committed any crimes, so quit stallin’ and answer the question!” The bearman started to crack his knuckles. “Ya don’t wanna end up hurt, do ya, boy?”

“Our boss ain’t the patient type, so it’d go better for ya if ya were quick about answerin’,” said the monkeyman—who appeared to have the position of “top flunky” in the group—in a high-pitched voice. These beastmen were all acting tough, but their power levels were so low, I didn’t fear them in the slightest. Though there was another issue too.

I thought they might have some useful information we could wring out of them, but looks like I was wrong. If they were a party looking to recruit a potential Master, like the Concord of the Tribes did with me, there would be no reason to try and intimidate us. And they didn’t strike me as the kind of people who’d know anything else of value either.

“Nemumu,” I whispered. “Do you sense anyone else in the vicinity?”

“No, no one,” Nemumu whispered back. “All the ones who were following us are in this alley. No other party is monitoring us from a distance either.”

There were very few people who could evade Nemumu’s detection skills, so judging by her response, there wasn’t anyone coming to “save” us at the last second as a way of making us indebted to them.

“They’re not soliciting us to join them, and this doesn’t look like some kind of false-flag rescue scam either,” I murmured. “I guess they’re just a bunch of thugs thinking we’re easy targets for a mugging?”

“This rabble don’t seem to be here to test our strength, either, milord,” Gold said in a low voice. “If you ask me, they’re a complete waste of our time.”

“I don’t think it’s an act,” Nemumu whispered. “I’m with Gold. This hole is most definitely dry.”

Both Gold and Nemumu seemed to agree with my conclusion that these beastmen weren’t going to be useful to us in any way. I’d thought they might at least have given us some nugget of information that I could’ve worked with, but life doesn’t always work out the way you want it to.

I sighed and let my shoulders droop, which the bearman misinterpreted as a sign of resignation.

“What’re you people whisperin’ ’bout, anyway? Finally decided to give up and tell us what we wanna know?”

“Boss, why don’t we take the silver-haired girl back to our inn for a nice little *heart-to-heart*?” the monkeyman suggested. “We can let her go once we’ve gotten tired of her.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea, monkey,” the bearman said. “She may not have much of a rack on her, but she’s prettier than any elf. I’ve never seen a chick as fine as her. We can teach her how *real* adventurers do things while she tells us her story.”

“Hey, boss! Shouldn’t we take that guy’s gold armor as our ‘teaching’ fee too?” This time, it was the raccoon-dogman that raised his voice. The foxman

and the ratman standing behind him both murmured excitedly.

“I heard that armor was made of fake gold, but I guess sellin’ it should get us some beer money,” the bearman said before turning to me and Gold. “Now, hand over the gem money and the armor, and beat it. We’ll let ya keep enough cash to pay for a room somewhere, so ya can thank your lucky stars we’re so generous!”

The entire time this exchange was going on, Nemumu was silently fuming beside me, the veins on her forehead throbbing. “Lord Dark, I await your orders. Give the word and I’ll turn these disgusting wretches into fine mists of blood and wipe them off the face of the surface world in an instant.”

“I understand how you feel, but we can’t just go killing them. It’d create more problems,” I said. “But I don’t want to have to deal with these idiots for a moment longer, so put them out of commission.”

“As you wish, Lord Dark,” Nemumu said.

“Hm? Are you inferiors outta your pitiful little minds? Don’tcha know disrespectin’ a member of the bear tribe will cost ya your worthless lives—”

“Milord, Nemumu, a moment?” Gold had interrupted the bearman and raised his hand to grab everyone’s attention. When we turned to look, we saw that the three beastmen behind us were flat out on the ground, seemingly having been knocked senseless. It appeared Gold had already dispatched our foes with his fists the second I had given the order. Even though Gold’s face was completely hidden by his helmet, I could tell from his voice that he was enjoying himself.

“Do you mind if I take care of these blighters, milord? I want to make *sure* they won’t bother us again,” he said, before adding, “Oh, *without* killing them, naturally.”

“Okay, you can deal with them, Gold,” I replied. “Do you mind if me and Nemumu head off to the inn by ourselves?”

“Oh, splendid, milord! Glad we could work it out!” Gold said delightedly. “Nemumu, are you sure you’re all right heading back to the inn with milord? Or should I say, heading back *alone* with him?”

Gold hadn't really needed to add that last part, but he had anyway.

"My job is to be at Lord Dark's side at all times," Nemumu said, clearing her throat. "I'd be more than happy to be put on babysitting duty. I'll let you have your fun with these guys, Gold."

I simply chuckled at Nemumu's reaction without saying anything, as her poker face and forehead veins gave way to a more buoyant expression. I was just glad Nemumu had gotten over her barely controlled rage.

Gold let out a huge belly laugh as he approached the bearman. "Good show! Leave everything to me, Nemumu! These bounders will know what *true* chivalry is once I'm done with them!"

"S-Screw you! Ya dare to defy seasoned adventurers like us?! Ya'd better not mess with us, inferior!" the bearman yelled.

Gold walked right up to the bearman without even bothering to draw a weapon. The fact that Gold had laid out three of his lackeys in an instant had shaken the bearman, but he wasn't about to turn tail and run, especially not when it was an inferior he was facing. The bearman threw a heavy right hook at Gold, but a petty thug was never going to be a match for the Level 5000 Auric Knight. Gold caught the fist in his hand as if it were a bag of beads and squeezed it just hard enough to draw tears and screams of pain out of the beastman.

"Yeowch! Damn you! I'm a proud beastman! A member of the bear tribe, and..." the bearman yelled before the pain interrupted his little speech. "Ow, ow, ow! Stop! You'll break my hand! Ow!"

"Are you running out on your boss?" I said to the monkeyman, who I'd spotted attempting to sneak away, thinking he could use the bearman's screams as cover. Of course, I wasn't having any of it. I summoned a single Gacha card.

"Fire Arrow!"

The fiery shot grazed the monkeyman's leather armor, causing him to yelp and stopping him in his tracks.

"Y-Ya stupid inferior!" he yelled. "How are ya able to use magic?! Who the hell *are* you people?!"

Gold guffawed at the monkeyman. “You seriously thought you could wriggle your way out of here without being noticed by milord? None of you are getting away, sport. I just *relish* teaching ruffians like you what good old-fashioned chivalry is all about, what? And well, this is as good an opportunity as any!”

Gold ambled over to the monkeyman with the bearman’s very sore right fist still firmly in his grasp so that he couldn’t flee.

“Ow! Yeowch!” the bearman cried. “That hurts! Please don’t pull my hand like that!” But Gold didn’t pay any heed to the beastman’s whimpers.

“I didn’t know Gold was into *that*,” I remarked.

“I believe it’s better to teach them a non-lethal lesson if we wish to make sure they do not cross you again,” said Nemumu. “In any case, we shouldn’t waste any more time here. Let’s return to the inn and get some rest. S-Since you didn’t have a bath last night, w-would you mind if I scrubbed your back, Lord Dark?”

We set off for the inn, leaving Gold to finish up in the alley. In case you were wondering, I bathed and changed by myself when we got back to the inn. Back in the Abyss, Mei and the fairy maids would often insist on bathing me and helping to change my attire, so I took this rare opportunity to do both of those things by myself. When I got back from my bath, I noticed Nemumu trying her best to conceal the look of disappointment on her face, but taking a bath with her would have been outside my comfort zone, so I simply laughed it off. We didn’t see Gold for the rest of the day, and it wasn’t until the next morning that he finally showed up while we were having breakfast.

“The results were *highly* satisfying, I would say,” he said, seeming rather chipper.



In a swamp on the third floor of the dungeon, golden locks danced about in the air, accompanied by a sword. Kyto the elf was engaged in close combat with a troll that was swinging its fists this way and that, and snarling like a bullfrog.

“You think you can hit me by doing that?” Kyto bellowed. The elf expertly ducked the troll’s fists of fury before getting in close enough to sink his sword

into the side of its torso. However, due to the troll's powerful regenerative abilities, the wound wasn't fatal.

A typical troll measured more than two meters tall and its flesh and bones were rock-solid. Under normal circumstances, just driving a sword into a troll was a feat in itself. Due to trolls having better resistance to weapons than orcs, it usually took a team of adventurers with a carefully planned-out strategy to take them down. But thanks to his Level 1500 abilities as well as the powers infused in his sword, Kyto was able to take on a group of trolls all by himself.

"And this makes you the last one!" Kyto yelled as he decapitated the roaring troll. While its head was still in midair, Kyto chopped it up into quarters to make extra sure the troll couldn't regenerate. Once Kyto had finished eviscerating the trolls, his traveling companion—the dark elf, Yanaaq—excitedly trotted up to the corpses in order to cut samples off with a knife.

"So these are the trolls that are said to have superior regenerative powers?" the dark elf said. "I never thought I'd get my hands on samples like these! My curiosity as a researcher is well and truly tickled. I am glad I was able to accompany you, Mr. Kyto! This just proves that a researcher must travel and do on-site investigations, rather than stay cooped up in a lab forever."

"Hey, Yanaaq," said a clearly agitated Kyto, who pointed his sword at his traveling partner. "You'd better not be messing around. I'm supposed to prevail in this trial sent to me by the Goddess by breaking through my growth limit and becoming a legendary hero revered by the people. Not to mention, I need to kill everybody in the queendom who made fun of me, as well as those impudent inferior insects."

Kyto paused briefly before getting to the point. "To achieve all that, I took a huge risk in helping you—a dark elf, of all people—to complete your research. We are *not* here to satisfy whatever piffling curiosities you may have. Or do I need to cut off one of your ears or gouge out an eye to make you understand what the stakes are?"

The elves and dark elves weren't on good terms to begin with, so a little friction between the two was to be expected, yet despite their racial animosity, Kyto had partnered with Yanaaq solely for the purpose of surpassing his growth

limit. For his part, Yanaaq didn't flinch even once during Kyto's crazed diatribe, seeing fit to simply refix his monocle before breezily giving his retort.

"I assure you I am not 'messaging around,' Mr. Kyto," he said. "As I've told you before, I'm collecting these samples because they are necessary for my research on how a race can surpass its growth limits. In fact, I am quite grateful to you, Mr. Kyto. Not only did you show an interest in my research, you also took a massive risk when you stole the legendary sword Grandius from the Elven Queendom to assist me. Not to mention, how you helped me to escape from my nation."

Yanaaq's nation, the Dark Elf Islands, considered the elimination of a race's growth limit a taboo subject for study. The authorities had arrested Yanaaq for pursuing this line of research and he had subsequently been sentenced to death. However, Yanaaq was able to get in contact with Kyto—who had reached his growth limit by that point—and thanks to the power of the Grandius, the dark elf was able to escape his nation and make his way to the continent with Kyto and one of his earlier test subjects.

And what's the Grandius, I hear you ask? A legendary sword once used by a Master, which the Elven Queendom viewed as a national treasure and had kept under lock and key until it was stolen. There are eight classes of weapons and armor, ranked as follows from highest to lowest: genesis, mythical, phantasma, epic, artifact, relic, rare, and common. The Grandius is a phantasma-class sword, meaning it is considered a highly superior weapon.

Anyway, returning to the story, Yanaaq's taboo research involved transplanting cells harvested from other races, monsters, and various other creatures in order to artificially breach a growth limit.

"During the course of my research, I have been able to successfully surpass the growth limits in human subjects by transplanting cells from monsters into them," said Yanaaq. "Even though the power levels of the monsters weren't all that much higher than 100, this approach allowed the subject to break its growth limit. I hope to refine this technique and one day use it to artificially remove the growth limit of dark elves simply by transplanting a few cells. The overall power level of our race would be infinitely raised. Yet my people see this as something that is strictly forbidden..."

“Hmph, I can see where your nation’s coming from,” Kyto said. “A proud race would shudder at the thought of having its blood mixed with cells from monsters.”

“But in the past, didn’t the elves mix their blood with that of the Masters in order to produce Submasters?” Yanaaq pointed out. “And weren’t those Masters of an entirely different race? All I’m doing is an artificial version of that practice.”

“Ha! That just means the way we elves manage our bloodlines is far superior to your research, which hasn’t even produced any good results yet!” Kyto scoffed.

“You are certainly harsh in your assessment,” Yanaaq laughed. “Then again, I cannot state that my experimentation up until now has been an *unequivocal* success. As a researcher, I find it incumbent upon me to own up to the current state of affairs. But in the future, I would like to be able to constantly churn out superior beings in the same vein as Hardy the Silent, the leader of the White Knights.”

Hearing a familiar name stopped Kyto from firing a sarcastic remark straight back at the dark elf, and all he could do was recoil and glower at him. By this time, the Elven Queendom had probably sent the White Knights on a manhunt for Kyto for stealing the Grandius, and even with the legendary sword in his hand, Kyto stood next to no chance of defeating Hardy. Kyto had known the risks when he’d gone against the queendom, but just imagining Hardy hot on his heels put him in a state of melancholy.

This is just another test I need to endure in order to break my growth limit and become a true hero! Once I’ve rid myself of this accursed growth limit, I’ll be able to level up again and overpower Hardy! And even now, we still have a backup plan if we find ourselves having to face Hardy prematurely...

As Kyto once again mentally steeled himself for the worst, Yanaaq brought up a different topic to lighten the mood, which had become increasingly somber.

“Now that I’ve retrieved these troll cell samples I’ve been seeking, the next thing I require is human test subjects. And I would like inferiors who are spry and full of life, if at all possible.”

“Fine, whatever you say,” Kyto said after a brief silence. “This dungeon’s always jam-packed with strapping young inferiors, and capturing them will be a piece of cake with the Grandius.”

“Very good, Mr. Kyto. I knew I could count on you. And this dungeon is more magnificent than I would’ve dared imagine. It’s full of monsters and inferiors who can be used in my experiments—so many, in fact, that a potential subject might stroll toward me at any moment. This is truly a marvelous place! Now my research will advance in leaps and bounds!”

Yanaaq’s eyes twinkled like those of a kid in a candy shop as he began to relate in graphic detail how he intended to splice humans and monsters together. Even Kyto, who was used to the kind of grotesque carnage you get on the battlefield, winced at Yanaaq’s lurid ideas for how he’d carry out his experimentation.

Good Goddess, I’m starting to sympathize with the inferiors destined to become this creep’s lab animals. But I can’t surpass my growth limit without breaking a few eggs. In fact, those inferiors should be happy that they get to help out a future hero.

Once Kyto had finished self-rationalizing, he walked away from the corpses of the trolls and began looking for a place to camp for the night. Now that he’d finished killing monsters so his partner could take samples of them, his next target was a few fresh humans Yanaaq could experiment on. The dark elf followed close behind Kyto, as did the hooded third member of the party—Yanaaq’s test subject.

Chapter 6: Wish Bracelet

A dozen or so days after my party and I had cashed in our first bag of magic gems from our opening foray into the dungeon, we joined the back of the line to enter it again. While we were standing there waiting our turn on this fine early morning, familiar voices called out to us from somewhere behind us.

“Dark! Mr. Gold! Miss Nemumu!”

Elio’s young party came running up to us, waving their arms around to attract our attention, though thanks to our finely-honed senses, we’d already known it was them before a word had even passed their lips. We hadn’t seen the teenagers for quite a while, which wasn’t all that unexpected, since adventurers typically stayed in this dungeon for long spells at a time, and the two parties were on completely different schedules. Like the first time we met them in this line, Elio’s party had brought camping gear with them.

“Wow, it’s been ages, Elio,” I said. “I think the last time I saw you guys was when we fought that Fourscythe Mantis.”

“I know, right? Unlike other dungeons, in this one, you basically *have* to sleep in it overnight. I can’t believe how tough it was finding you again, just ‘cause we didn’t have the same traveling schedule. But now we’ve run into you again, we can finally give you a *real* present to show our gratitude for everything you’ve done for us.”

“A ‘real’ present?” I asked, tilting my head quizzically to one side at this unexpected phrase. Elio’s crew all had genuine smiles on their faces, as if they were about to throw me a surprise party. Elio coaxed his sister out from behind him.

“Miya said she wanted to thank you properly for all the times you’ve helped us,” Elio explained. “Come on, Miya. You said you’d give it to him.”

“I know I did, brother. Stop pushing me...” Miya protested as she reached into her pocket. “Um, here you go, Dark. I know it isn’t much, but I want you to have

it.”

Miya’s face was bright red as she thrust the palms of her hands toward me, and in them, I saw a seashell with two hinged halves that had been fashioned into a receptacle. It was so small, it could fit in the palm of a child’s hand with room to spare, and it seemed to contain a substance I couldn’t immediately identify. Baffled, I took the seashell from Miya.

“What is it?” I said.

“It’s a salve for burns my late grandmother once taught me how to make,” Miya replied. She was looking up at me timidly. “It won’t get rid of any scarring, but I hope it can at least give you some kind of relief if you end up getting burned at all. It’s the least I can do for you after all you’ve done for us. W-Will you accept it?”

This was the first time since leaving the Abyss that I’d been given a present purely out of the goodness of someone’s heart. As Miya said, in terms of quality and value, the medicine wasn’t really of note, but I was deeply touched by the warmth of feeling behind the gesture. I lovingly traced the ridges of the seashell with my fingers, and I felt compelled to express my boundless appreciation for the gift.

“Of course. I’ll gladly accept it,” I said. “Thank you so much. It’s very considerate of you.”

But words weren’t enough to do the full depth of my gratitude justice, so I delved into one of my pockets to give her something in return—the kind of gift a girl would want. *Taking a sword, knife, or shield out of my pocket would raise too many questions, and anyway, that’d be a bit much just to say thanks for a bit of salve,* I thought. *Hm, how about something small? Something wearable, maybe?*

I figured it shouldn’t be an expensive ring or a necklace adorned with jewels, though. It should be something Miya would be able to accept without too much consternation... Something that’d be appropriate for a dungeon quester like her...

After a spot of quick-fire deliberating, I grabbed an Unlimited Gacha card from my pocket and released the item in my hand before whipping it out from under

my cloak.

“Please accept this as thanks for the medicine,” I said.

“Wow, it’s so pretty...” she said, marveling at the item I’d produced.

Curled into a circle in the palm of my hand was a wristband woven out of red yarn—an SSR Wish Bracelet. Even though it was an extremely rare—and in theory, powerful—magic item, the exact description of its power was oddly cryptic: “If one wishes hard enough, it will create a minor miracle.” I’d tested the item out once before, but I didn’t witness anything approaching a miracle when I made a wish. Despite it being a Double-S Rare gacha card, I wasn’t quite sure how it worked, nor what its real powers were.

Yet the bracelet was the same color red as Miya’s hair, so I figured it wouldn’t look out of place if she wore it on her wrist. Since it was made out of yarn, it wouldn’t be a liability in this dungeon, and she could slip it on and off whenever she wanted. Plus, it didn’t look particularly expensive, so I thought it’d work well as a small token of my appreciation.

Miya—who hadn’t been expecting me to give her anything in return—looked unsure about what she should do.

“Um, that salve didn’t deserve anything in return, and definitely not this pretty bracelet. And another thing...” Miya trailed off as her eyes drifted to the two members of my party standing behind me—specifically Nemumu, who was muttering in a low voice.

“I c-can’t believe she gets a present from Lord Dark and I don’t!” she hissed.

“Nemumu, m’girl, I understand how you feel, but tone it down a notch, what?” Gold said, trying to calm her down. “Or are you bally well trying to embarrass milord by scaring the young miss? If that’s your game, I won’t stand for it, love.”

“Nemumu. Gold,” I said curtly, causing both of them to stand to attention.

“Forgive me, Lord Dark!” Nemumu exclaimed.

“Sorry, milord. I let my tongue run away with itself a tad there,” Gold said.

I cleared my throat and turned back to Miya and the boys. “This isn’t just for

the salve. You've really moved me with your kindness," I said. "So please, I insist you take it."

And I meant every word of it. I'd also chosen this bracelet because I thought it'd look good on her, and who knows, it might even help her on one of her quests. My insistence seemed to convince her. She turned to her brother and two childhood friends, who were all nodding at her to take it, which gave her the final little push to shyly accept my gift.

"Th-Thank you very much, Dark," Miya said, gripping the bracelet tightly with both hands and allowing herself an unguarded smile that seemed to come from the bottom of her heart. Seeing how much she liked my gift made me smile too.

"Aren't you glad, Miya?" said Elio.

"That color red totally suits you, Miya!" Gimra said. "Dark's got good taste in gifts all right!"

Wordy silently nodded twice. Miya blushed happily at all the praise the boys were showering her with. Before their party entered the dungeon, she tied the bracelet around her left wrist in front of all of us.

"Thank you so much, Dark. I'll treasure it forever," she said, emphasizing her declaration of gratitude with a beaming smile that stretched from ear to ear.



When my party and I finally made it into the dungeon, we first traveled to a secluded area like usual so I could activate my Conceal and Flight cards without anyone noticing. As we flew toward the staircase that led to the second floor, Nemumu brought up our meetup with Elio's party.

"I-I won't deny I was jealous," she admitted. "But I also spoke up because that SSR Wish Bracelet was clearly a much better present than the low-quality salve she gave you!"

"Yes, you're right in your assessment of the medicine, but I was really touched by their generosity," I explained.

"There's no shame in that, milord," Gold remarked. "If you had seen fit to give her a sword, a weapon, or jewelry or whatnot, I would have given you a right

earbashing myself there and then! But I could see that milord had thought long and hard about what to give the young lady, and had come to the conclusion that a bracelet matching her hair color was the perfect gift. That's using your noodle, old bean! I can't imagine anyone—even a bally fool—finding fault with any of it, what? In fact, a truly devoted woman would have taken it upon herself to encourage such an exchange of gifts. Don't you agree, love?"

A frustrated noise escaped Nemumu's lips. "Fine, Gold, you're right! You're right about all of it!"

Gold gave a hearty belly laugh. "Nemumu, you still have an awful lot to learn, m'girl!"

Nemumu's face wrinkled in vexation as Gold continued to guffaw. But Gold hadn't quite finished commending me on my actions.

"Everything you have done up until now has been calculated to win the hearts of those striplings, milord, correct? For if by chance we do become famous, those young sprouts will be telling people the land over what you did for them today, and our stock will only rise further. Strength alone isn't enough to get your name out there—you also need to throw kindness and personality into the mix. At first, I thought you helping those kiddies out was naught but sheer coincidence, but you had it planned out all along, didn't you? You jolly well astonish me, milord! You are the epitome of a master tactician, what?"

"Huh? Is all this part of your master plan, Lord Dark?" Nemumu asked.

"No, it's not," I replied. "It never crossed my mind that I'd get involved with Miya's party in this way."

It was certainly true that it hadn't been my intention to involve myself with them when I'd helped her party out before, but perhaps it was circumstance that had led me to do so. Being up here on the surface world again, I found myself subject to the same prejudice from other races that I'd experienced before. Whenever I went out to buy things, for example, vendors would try to overcharge me because they thought humans were easy to scam. Other shoppers would also look down their noses at me with contempt in their eyes.

But the pure, unconditional kindness Miya's party had shown toward me had made me feel like this world was still worth saving, and I'd found myself

assisting them in their hour of need and reciprocating a gift. So it wasn't what Gold and Nemumu were thinking at all, but even though I tried to deny it, Gold didn't believe me.

"Too much modesty will make you seem shallow, you know," he pointed out.

Nemumu's eyes widened further as they twinkled in wonderment. "You're so honorable, Lord Dark!"

We were almost at the stairwell by this point, so I decided it was best to simply give in and accept their excessive praise, and I chuckled awkwardly as I descended to the ground.

Chapter 7: Black Fools Rising

The third floor of the dungeon was awash with swamps that were absolutely teeming with giant toads, poisonous leeches, mosquito swarms, and other types of monsters along those lines. The swamps came in all sizes, and if you didn't watch your step, you could easily slip and be swallowed whole by one of the bogs. Because of this, the third floor was considered much more dangerous than the second floor, and even though the loot on this level could net you more money than the two before it, very few people ventured here on the regular to make their living.

A party of four experienced human questers had called it a night after hunting monsters on this floor. They'd made camp on a patch of solid ground with a good enough view of the surrounding area to see enemies approaching, and had decided to pair up for their watch rotations. Each quester had a power level of around 50, and the party as a whole had been to the third floor several times before to hunt monsters. The light of the campfire flickered over the two watchmen on duty, who were idly chit-chatting to ward off fatigue. Naturally, the topic of conversation was adventurers.

"I heard a bunch of beastmen got into a tussle with some humans the other day," said Suvellan, who was sipping on some hot water. "But that human party was the Black Fools. You know who I mean, right? The folk who showed up a week or so ago. So anyway, those beastmen got their asses handed to them. When I heard those bossy, loudmouth beastmen had gotten what was coming to them, I almost jumped for joy."

Suvellan was the party's tracker. He sat next to Gilbert, their vanguard swordsman, who was stroking his chin with a leathery, scarred hand.

"The Black Fools, you say?" Gilbert mused. "Who are they?"

"You've never heard of them? They're the most talked-about party in town. They're made up of a boy who wears a fool's mask, a golden knight, and this *absolute* fairy princess. They made it all the way to the fifth floor in just a few

days.”

The way Suvellan said it, it sounded like a young boy was powering through the dungeon accompanied by a knight in a full suit of armor made of gold, and a woman so beautiful she was like the kind of fairy princess you only heard about in bedtime stories. What’s more, people had started calling the party the “Black Fools” because the boy constantly wore a black hood over his black hair, and a fool’s mask over his face.

Gilbert shot his buddy a disbelieving look on hearing this bit of gossip. “Come on now, Suvellan, don’t try and take me for a ride. *Nobody* could reach the fifth floor in just a few days. You of all people should know that, after all we’ve been through in here. If you’re going to tell tall tales, at least make them halfway believable.”

“No, trust me on this one. Too many adventurers have seen them down at the guild building, cashing in gems they scored from the fifth-floor yetis. But apparently, nobody has any idea how the Black Fools even got to that floor in the first place.”

Suvellan then went on to repeat a rumor he’d heard that was even harder to believe. “They also say those three defeated a Fourscythe Mantis, all by themselves. And the masked boy was able to use tactical magic without reciting the spells.”

“You’re talking absolute hogwash now,” Gilbert scoffed. “This city already banded together to defeat a Fourscythe Mantis only a decade ago. Another one’s not due to appear for another twenty years, give or take. In any case, you might be able to dupe someone who doesn’t know the first thing about magic, but you can’t pull the wool over my eyes. I may be a frontline fighter who’s no expert on magic, but I’ve been slicing and dicing all manner of creatures for a good while now, so I’ve picked up on the basics of magic, you know.”

“Sure, I hear you, buddy. I didn’t believe it at first either, but the guild used Appraisal to confirm that the gem the Black Fools brought back was a real, *genuine* Fourscythe Mantis gem. And there are actual eyewitnesses who saw the boy casting unvoiced spells. One of them was that human mage.”

“Oh, the younger of the red-haired siblings, you mean?” Gilbert knew

immediately that Suvellan was talking about Miya because of how rare human mages were. Female ones were even rarer still. Miya had been forced to drop out of magic school due to lack of funds, but she was a full-fledged mage in the eyes of other human adventurers.

When she'd first turned up in the city, a few human parties had tried to recruit her, but they'd all failed—partly due to her protective older brother, but also because Miya had been far too shy to even consider taking them up on their offers. Eventually, parties just stopped approaching her. After all, it was said that you didn't want to push your luck with mages in case you accidentally made them angry enough to lash out at you. Parties made up of other races didn't even bother trying to recruit her, because not only did they believe a human mage would be a useless addition, their pride wouldn't allow them to ask for anything from someone they saw as an inferior being.

It turned out that Miya—who'd already made quite a name for herself due to her unconventional class—had been excitedly talking about the boy at one of the food halls.

"A boy in a fool's mask who uses combat magic and tactical magic without reciting spells," Suvellan said, repeating the young mage's words verbatim. Gilbert gulped loudly at this disconcerting account.

"If that's true, we've got something seriously crazy on our hands," he remarked. "Not only have three humans defeated a Fourscythe Mantis all by themselves, one of them is capable of casting unvoiced tactical magic spells. That boy must be some kind of magical prodigy—maybe even the reincarnation of a legendary hero."

Defeating a Fourscythe Mantis was one thing, but non-verbal tactical magic was almost exclusively the realm of the four races that excelled in sorcery: the elves, the dark elves, the demonkin, and the dragonutes. Hearing that a human could perform this level of magic was akin to being told the end times had come, so it was no wonder Gilbert was spooked by the idea of it. Suvellan savored Gilbert's bewilderment as he took another sip of his boiled water.

"The 'reincarnation of a legendary hero,' huh? I like the way you phrased that, Gilbert. I wish a hero *would* come and put an end to all this dogshit bigotry we

have to put up with from the other races. They always treat us like total garbage, no matter what we do.”

“Yeah, they’ve really been putting the screws on us humans,” Gilbert agreed. “I feel like it’s even worse now than it was in the past.”

“You reckon? I thought it’d always been this bad,” Suvellan said, before his attention was distracted by a message from his bladder. “Ah, sorry about this, but I think I’ve had too much to drink.” He picked up the hand shovel they used for taking bathroom breaks in the wild.

This was Gilbert’s cue to rib his pal as he wandered off into the night. “Be sure to dig the hole deep this time. I don’t want to have to spend the rest of the night with the smell of your piss troubling my nostrils.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Suvellan retorted. “And I don’t wanna hear that you let monsters attack the camp while the party’s eyes and ears was off taking a leak.”

Gilbert laughed at this riposte. “Screw off. Try not to get your pants wet.”

“Keep talking, wiseass.”

Suvellan walked a good distance from the campfire until he was sure he was obscured by the darkness. After all, he wasn’t the type to let anyone watch him do his business, even if they were his close friends. Once he’d found a reasonable spot, he dug a hole with the hand shovel and took a whiz, slowly exhaling as he did so.

Once he was done, Suvellan wiped his hands on some dirt and filled the hole in again using the hand shovel. Since Suvellan was a veteran quester, he made sure the hole was deep enough so the smell didn’t carry over to the camp. A novice learning by imitating more senior adventurers would just move the soil around a bit, which usually resulted in some rather unfortunate consequences for the rest of the camp. When Suvellan was just starting out, his traveling buddies would often shout at him over and over for making this rookie error.

“I can look back on that now and laugh,” Suvellan said to no one in particular. “Actually, no, I can’t. Whatever Gilbert squeezed out that one time stank so bad, we had to decamp to another location.”

Suvellan made his way back to the camp, intending to chew Gilbert out once

more for making him have to deal with that bad memory, but when he got there, the big bear of a man he was expecting to see sitting in front of the fire was no longer there.

“What’s going on here?!” Suvellan yelled.

“Now tell me—why would a mere insect like yourself dare to keep someone like me waiting for so long?” Standing where Gilbert had been was a young elf of unknown origin. His long ears poked out between his honey locks, and his eyes shone like emeralds. On one side of the elf, there was a large broadsword as tall as he was, balancing on its tip with his hand on the hilt to steady it, while on the other was Gilbert’s decapitated corpse. The elf had his foot firmly planted on the adventurer’s severed head.

A strangled sob of horror rose up from within Suvellan, and he felt blood rush to his head—but Suvellan was a seasoned veteran, and this wasn’t the first time he’d seen a comrade die in such a senseless way. He was also facing an elf who was obviously way more powerful than him, so he knew he’d just be needlessly throwing his own life away if he succumbed to the rage surging up inside him at that moment.

Suvellan took a few deep breaths, sucking in the chilly night air to cool down his senses. *Relax. Just calm down*, he thought to himself. Suvellan stole a glance at the tent where the two other members of his party were sleeping, but the pool of blood oozing out from it confirmed they’d been slaughtered as well. Suvellan was the only member of his party still alive.

We’re surrounded by a shallow swamp, so Gilbert should’ve heard this guy’s footsteps in the water as he approached. But it doesn’t look like anyone had time to put up a fight, which means in all likelihood, magic was used to kill them.

Suvellan lowered his stance and inched his right hand toward his hip.

So I’m facing an elf who’s a higher level than me and who can use magic, huh? I’m guaranteed to lose if I try to take him head-on. I can’t deal with this guy by myself. I have to somehow alert the guild that there’s someone out here killing adventurers. We may be lowly humans, but the guild should still put together a vigilante party to capture and execute this murderer. All I need to do is escape

and give a description of this guy to the guild! I can't win this fight on my own!

Suvellan slowly backed away from the golden-haired elf, who merely clicked his tongue to indicate how thoroughly fed up he was.

"I'm talking to *you*, human, yet you see fit to ignore me? This is why I loathe you inferiors," Kyto said. "Can't you at least give me *some* amusement by firing off a few wisecracks?"

Suvellan's response was to keep his mouth firmly shut.

"Say something, human!" Kyto yelled. "I literally have your companion under my foot, and you have nothing to say about it? I know you and your kind are the lowest of all the races, but surely there's a limit to how utterly pathetic you can be?!"

Kyto kicked Gilbert's head away, which gave Suvellan the precious few moments he needed to reach into his hip pack and pull out the smoke bomb he'd been saving for emergencies. He threw the canister to the ground, and the thick white smoke billowing from it quickly covered a wide area.

"A smokescreen?!" Kyto roared. "You're choosing to flee instead of fighting? You insects are *beyond* cowardly!"

"Kiss my keister, elf! I'll make you pay for what you did to my pals!" Suvellan yelled over his shoulder as he scampered across the bogland, all the while reviewing the soundness of his strategy in his head.

The freakiest thing about mages is you never know what kind of trick they're going to pull next. But even mages have a weakness! In most cases, there's pretty much no point casting an attack spell if they can't see their target! So all I need to do is get out of range while that smokescreen's still there!

Not only was Suvellan the party's tracker and scout, he'd been battling monsters on the dungeon's third floor for years. He knew the lay of the land like the back of his hand, and he'd memorized the best hiding places, all the edible plants and animals, and where he could find potable water.

I'll get away from that damn elf and make him pay the ultimate price for killing my party, as well as for putting his foot on Gilbert's head—

Before Suvellan could finish the thought, he received a blow to the back of the head which felt a lot like it was caused by a blunt object. He fell sprawling to the ground, hitting it face-first. Although the blow hadn't been heavy enough to render him unconscious, Suvellan's vision had a red tint to it, and he was too woozy to even contemplate getting back to his feet.

"Wait..." he said in a daze. "What the hell? He wasn't supposed to be able to see me through all that smoke..."

A sound that was a mix of pain and frustration escaped from Suvellan. He tried to get his throbbing head to stop spinning by holding it, but as soon as he put his hand near the place where he'd been struck, it was instantly drenched in blood. If it had been a magic spell that had hit Suvellan, it was high-level magic of a kind he'd never even heard of before. But the fact of the matter was—and he knew it without being told—that blow had been pure brute force. In spite of the smokescreen, the elf had been able to determine the fleeing Suvellan's position with pinpoint accuracy. But how?

Suvellan used the last of his strength to crane his neck around and look behind him, only to see something he could never have anticipated. Suvellan realized immediately how the elf had struck him from behind with dead-on precision. This contrivance was also how the elf had been able to approach the camp without making so much as a sound traversing the surrounding swamp water. Gilbert and the other seasoned veterans in his party wouldn't have had even a sniff of a chance of defending themselves.

"Damn," he said quietly. "That's not..." But before Suvellan could say the word "fair" to complete the thought, another blow to the head turned off the lights.

"Wow, he really thought he could get away. Honestly, these inferiors are much, much too conniving, despite their lack of aptitude," Yanaaq the dark elf said as he approached Suvellan to check if he was still alive, before using healing magic to treat the human's head wound. Yanaaq wasn't saving his life out of pity, however. He needed a live human for an experiment that would see him fusing a test subject with a monster. Once Suvellan's breathing had returned to normal, Yanaaq turned to admonish Kyto.

“I’m afraid this doesn’t help me, Mr. Kyto. I remember specifically asking you to capture inferiors that I can use as lab animals, but you killed all of them except for this one.”

“You only need the one lab rat, don’t you?” Kyto said wearily.

“One inferior isn’t nearly enough, Mr. Kyto. I need as many as I can. Call it security in case anything goes wrong. I must ask that, next time, you refrain from this kind of wholesale slaughter and focus on delivering my test subjects to me *alive*.”

Kyto tutted. “Fine, fine. I’ll be more careful next time. But I’m warning you—if I come across any other inferiors who pull cheap tricks like this one did, or who take the idiotic option of trying to fight me, I’m killing them without a second thought. The very thought of an inferior not knowing their place pisses me off so much, I’d have no choice but to butcher them in order to maintain my sanity!”

“Yes, I empathize with you greatly on that,” said Yanaaq. “Indeed, there are a number of inferiors who get this mistaken notion that, with enough effort, they will be able to win against members of a chosen race, such as you or I. I do not know if they are truly ignorant of how the world works or if they purposely choose to overlook their harsh reality, but they will insist on living that fanciful dream. I myself hope those useless wretches die horrible deaths, though preferably, after I have used them in one of my more gruesome experiments. But since, alas, I do not have time for that, you may kill any unruly inferiors we come across, if that is your wish.”

“See? Even a dark elf like you gets where I’m coming from,” Kyto remarked.

While Kyto and Yanaaq were engaged in their invidious mockery of humans, the hooded test subject—who was one of the dark elf’s “creations”—bound the still-unconscious Suvellan and threw him over its shoulder. The trio left the boggy area with their human quarry, the sound of Kyto and Yanaaq still conversing gradually fading away as they headed off into the night, until all that remained was the silent campsite and the blood-drenched bodies of the three dead adventurers.

Chapter 8: About-Face

After another long day of questing in the dungeon, my team and I stopped off at the guild. Dusk had been consumed by the evening shadows, and when we walked in, we found the building teeming with adventurers freshly returned from their own campaigns. After spending days in the dungeon without the opportunity to bathe, it was fair to say the smell coming from the throng was rather pungent. My team and I, however, showed up with barely a speck of dust on our clothing and armor. We headed straight for the line in front of the magic gem exchange counter, and when we got to the front of it, we were met by the same dwarf receptionist who had questioned how we'd come to be in possession of our gems—and who had called me a “know-it-all inferior”—just a handful of weeks earlier. She practically leapt on us, jumping out from behind the counter to come greet us.

“Mr. Dark!” she exclaimed, all smiles. “I’m pleased you managed to make it back safely today! Are you tired? Would you like us to prepare supper for you and your friends? Or would you prefer some wine instead?” The receptionist’s attitude was a complete reversal from the treatment we’d received before.

“Thanks, but none of that will be necessary,” I said. “I’d appreciate it if you could cash in our gems, though.”

“But of course, Mr. Dark! We here at the guild thank you for always bringing back such an impressive number of gems!”

The receptionist spun on her heels and rushed back to the counter to conduct the gem exchange. Gold—who was carrying the heavy bag of gems over his shoulder—looked on as the dwarf hurried back to her post.

“Well, well, well. This is a mighty jolly fine change in attitude, I must say. One might even say it warms the cockles of your heart to see it, what? It was only a little while ago that she was referring to us as ‘inferiors.’”

“Well, I’m not going to let her get *too* friendly with Lord Dark,” Nemumu said, puffing her cheeks out indignantly at the receptionist’s sycophantic display. I

chuckled awkwardly as we walked up to the counter, where Gold plonked the sack of gems down. The receptionist beamed when she saw the contents of the sack, as if she'd just been presented with a pot of gold.

She let out a squeal of appreciative awe. “Just *look* at all these fifth-floor yeti gems! You truly are amazing, Mr. Dark! This is too marvelous for words!”

I'm sure you're wondering why the receptionist's attitude had done a complete one-eighty. Part of the reason was that the guild's Appraisal specialist had confirmed the gem from the Fourscythe Mantis was genuine, but her newfound appreciation for us had mostly come about due to our retrieval of ice gems from the yetis that lived in the frozen tundras of the fifth floor. Ice gems were used to cool down objects, which meant there was a lot of demand for them due to their wide range of applications. Supplies of the gemstones, however, were woefully low. In the dungeon in this city, the first floor was covered in lush grassland, the second floor was a barren wasteland, the third floor was filled with swamps, a vast jungle dominated the fourth floor, and the fifth floor was basically one big wintry tundra. The fourth floor's jungle was so dense and forbidding that even the beastfolk with their superior sense of direction would often get lost in its thick undergrowth. Because of this, only the fewest of the few ever made it to the fifth floor, but thanks to my SR Flight card, my team and I could reach the staircase to the fifth floor without needing to hack our way through the tortuous jungle. We were able to reach the fifth floor's frozen tundras, farm a load of ice gems, and return to the city all within the space of a day.

When we'd arrived at the guild with our first haul of ice gems, the dwarf receptionist had gotten down on her hands and knees and begged for forgiveness.

“I sincerely apologize for how I treated you the other day!” she'd said with tears pricking her eyes. “I promise it will never happen again, and I will tell the rest of the guild that they must treat you with the utmost respect! So please, *please* don't leave for another dungeon, I beg you! If word gets out that I was rude to an adventurer who can bring back a sackful of ice gems in a single day, it won't just be me on the chopping block—heads will roll all the way up the chain! I'll even upgrade you to D-rank, so please accept my apology!”

Ice gems were an extremely scarce commodity, and as such, they were in very high demand. After all, it wasn't just restaurants and bars that wanted them; due to the ice properties the gems conferred, they were highly sought-after for weaponry and protective gear too, as well as for use in laboratories. It was largely because of all of these numerous and wide-ranging applications that supplies of the gemstones were so extremely tight. Then along comes a party of "inferiors" who can bring back a large sack filled with ice gems in just a day. If that same group of "inferiors" were to subsequently take their business elsewhere due to the bigoted abuse they'd received in their own guild... Well, the chopping block the necks of these receptionists might end up on could well be literal.

Thanks to these circumstances, I was currently enjoying a higher rank than before, and the guild rolled out the red carpet every time I showed my face in the building. The receptionist finished up the transaction and offered one final, heartfelt farewell to me and my team as we walked away from the counter.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Dark! Yes, thank you so very, very much!" she fawned. "We here at the guild warmly anticipate your next visit to our establishment!"

No sooner had we strolled away from the reception desk than we were greeted by a familiar crew of adventurers.

"Young man! Miss! Sir! How are you all doin' tonight?" someone with a deep, booming voice called over to us.

"Good to see ya!" four more male voices cheered in unison.

"Well, well, and a fine evening to you too, chaps!" Gold replied. "Have you fellows been wetting your whistle again?"

There was also a tavern that the guild managed within the confines of the premises, and it was there that the bearman and his lackeys were sitting. They got up from their chairs to greet us as we wandered over to them. This was the same group of beastmen that had tried to rob us in an alleyway before Gold had knocked them down to size. After that, Gold had spent the rest of the day teaching the thugs about "good old-fashioned chivalry," and it appeared Gold's rather severe teaching methods had done the trick, for the beastmen had gone

out of their way to be extra polite from that point on. Whenever they saw us, they would bow their heads deeply and address me as “young man,” Nemumu as “miss,” and Gold as “sir.” Apparently this was the “chivalry” Gold had been talking about.

It isn't quite what I'd had in mind when I heard the word “chivalry” when I was growing up, or even when I was part of the Concord of the Tribes, I thought, tilting my head to one side. But I didn't want to be rude to the beastmen, who seemed content that their actions were suitably chivalrous, so I kept my observation to myself.

“Milord, do you mind if I join these affable chaps for a pint?” Gold asked me. “We can meet up again later tonight.”

“Ya mean it, sir?” said the bearman. “In that case, what do the young man and Miss Nemumu here say to joinin' us too?” The bearman bowed his head again and again while he was saying this, as if to underline the invitation he was extending. His lackeys chirped in as well.

“*Please*, Miss Nemumu!” one said. “I insist we sit together and have some drinks!”

“No way. Your stink would drive her insane. She should sit next to me.”

“Nuh-uh! Miss Nemumu's gonna sit next to *me*!”

A thoroughly grossed-out Nemumu hoicked up her scarf so it covered her nose. “Shut up. Don't speak to me,” she said, much to the disappointment of the lackeys.

The bearman turned to me and attempted to lighten the mood a little. “In that case, why don't *you* join us, young man? Back when I was your age, I was already drinkin' like a champ, so I promise you'll be fine.”

Technically, the legal drinking age here was fifteen, but practically everyone ignored that. There were parents who didn't allow their young children to drink alcohol though, because they'd heard it was unhealthy. Nemumu would definitely be one of those parents if she ever had children.

“Don't encourage Lord Dark to take up your nasty habits!” she berated the bearman. “He's far too young to be drinking!”

“Perish the thought, miss. The young man ain’t too young to be drinkin’ with us at all. In fact, drinkin’ alcohol is a perfectly healthy pastime. Now, if ya were talking ’bout *real* ‘nasty habits,’ like gettin’ high then playin’ hide the sausage with some broad, that’s a different story. Sure, it feels good enough to melt your mind, but doin’ it to excess’ll def’nitely kill off a few brain cells—oomph!”

Nemumu had brought the bearman’s rather gratuitous monologue to an abrupt halt by punching him squarely in the face. “How could you talk about something so *disgusting* in front of Lord Dark?!” she exclaimed.

“Thank ya very much, miss! Thank ya very much!” Even though his nose was bleeding, the bearman appeared to be beside himself with joy at the physical rebuke he’d just received. His lackeys also seemed quite keen to have the same treatment.

“Hey, that ain’t fair, boss! Do me too, miss!”

“No, miss! Do me!”

“Screw those guys! Please gimme a taste of your knuckle sandwich too!”

Unable to stop myself, I laughed out loud at this ridiculous spectacle. Nemumu, on the other hand, was far from amused by the gaggle of beastmen all begging for her to pummel them. In fact, she seemed totally grossed out by their propositions.

“You maggots are seriously beyond help,” she announced.

Once everyone had calmed down again, Gold sat down to share a drink with the beastmen, while Nemumu and I headed back to our inn with the gem money. Like always, I used my gacha cards to make sure the rooms were secure before we took off our gear and relaxed. Nemumu was still in a huff about our encounter with the beastmen.

“Honestly!” she grumbled. “Why’s everybody up here on the surface world such *lowlifes*! This is no environment for you, Lord Dark!”

“I know how you feel, but you should cool it a little, yeah?” I said to her. “Yes, those beastmen were being weird, but right now, things are proceeding according to plan. They’re not worth wasting your breath over.”

We'd managed to make it all the way to the fifth floor where we could farm boatloads of highly sought-after ice gems, as well as gotten ourselves bumped up from F-rank to D-rank, which was the fastest *any* party had been promoted since the city was founded. The fact that it was a party of humans that had achieved this feat had only surprised the dwarves down at the guild even more. On top of that, I'd made an encouraging discovery.

"At first, I'd thought this dungeon was too vast for anyone to quest through," I continued. "But then I found out I could use the Teleportation card *inside* the dungeon and travel back to the Abyss, so this has all worked out perfectly."

Due to it taking several days for a party of ordinary adventurers to reach the fifth floor, there were few people—if any—on that level, so my team had very little reason to worry about anyone seeing what we were getting up to. That's why, as soon as we reached the tundras of the fifth floor, I'd leave Gold and Nemumu to hunt yetis while I teleported back to the Abyss to do some quick inspection tours. While there, I'd often do a few Unlimited Gacha pulls myself, check on the progress of my plan for revenge against Sasha, and converse with my inner circle, who I'd left in charge of my underground citadel. This workaround made the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon such a convenient location for us, I was willing to tolerate a bit of bad behavior from the surface-world adventurers.

Though I do wonder if pestering Nemumu for her to punch you in the face doesn't go a bit beyond mere "bad behavior." Just thinking back to the scene at the bar started me giggling again. Not everything was going swimmingly, however.

"I guess the fact we can't easily raise our rank any further by simply turning in more ice gems does present us with a problem," I mused.

"I can't believe the guild hasn't already promoted you to A-rank after all you've done for them," Nemumu huffed. "The whole guild must be blind as bats."

"Leaving their collective eyesight aside, we really had no choice but to accept their explanation that we simply don't have enough experience as adventurers yet," I pointed out.

A guild typically ranks adventurers based on their abilities, their levels of contribution, their years of experience, and their conduct, as well as several other factors. Thanks to our ice gem hauls, my party had been recognized for our extremely higher-than-expected degree of contribution, but it had only been a matter of weeks since we'd first registered as adventurers, and the guild had told us we just weren't experienced enough yet to move up to a higher rank.

"We sorely wish we could recommend that you and your party be promoted to C-rank, but I'm afraid you've been adventurers for too short a time," the receptionist had told us the day we'd been promoted to D-rank. "Now if you were to perform a feat that would convince *everyone* of your prowess as adventurers, it might be a different story..."

Farming ice gems was definitely an exceedingly challenging task for ordinary adventurers, but beyond that, it was just another job, which made it nothing extraordinary in and of itself. So my team and I faced a barrier to getting to C-rank that couldn't be overcome simply by retrieving more ice gems—at least, not in a short time frame.

"Ordinarily, we'd tell you to just remain active for another three or four years if you want to move up, but in your case, we're willing to promote you to C-rank if you continue with us for a year. I'm afraid this is all we can do for you..." the receptionist had said. "Are you angry with us, Mr. Dark? I really hope you aren't. Please don't say you're going to leave for another city! I beg you! Please don't leave us, Mr. Dark! I'll do anything you ask of me!"

Genuine tears had welled up in the dwarf receptionist's eyes when she'd said that last line, which pretty much confirmed to me that her hands were tied when it came to the ranking system. Because of that, I decided not to kick up a stink or pursue the matter further.

"That little receptionist just *had* to go using her seductive charms on you, didn't she?" Nemumu grumbled back in our guest suite. "Shameless woman."

"I *really* don't think she was trying to be seductive," I said. "I'm pretty sure she was just scared we'd quit town and go questing in another dungeon."

"No, no. As a fellow woman, I can tell these things," Nemumu insisted. "That

receptionist was using her womanly wiles on you, Lord Dark. That mask you have on can't hide your hair that is blacker than midnight, or your skin that's as white as the driven snow, or your voice that is more melodious than all the harps in Heaven. No woman could *resist* trying to seduce you when faced with all of that! I think you need to be more aware of just how attractive you are. This isn't just about that receptionist either. You shouldn't allow yourself to be strung along by *any* female adventurer who talks to you."

It almost sounded like Nemumu was giving a warning to a little brother she dotes on. And sure, I was wearing the Bracelet of Youth that meant my body was perpetually that of a twelve-year-old's and Nemumu appeared eighteen, so anyone looking at us would've assumed I really was her kid brother—but in truth, I was turning fifteen by this point. I was too old to be told to watch out for strangers. But I understood Nemumu was saying this out of concern for me, so I decided not to make a fuss about it.

"Okay. I'll be careful," I assured her.

"Thank you for heeding my words. I'll always be at your side to ensure your safety, Lord Dark, so there is no need to worry on that count. I swear on my life that I will protect you," Nemumu vowed, looking rather cheerful and animated. I wasn't sure if it was because I'd promised to be careful or because I'd granted her yet another opportunity to express her fealty to me. I mean, I *was* flattered that all of my retainers were so steadfastly loyal to me, but it could get a little much sometimes.

She doesn't have to act so strict and unbending all the time either, I thought, though personalities weren't the kind of thing you could just order people to change. So after letting out a quiet sigh, I decided to switch topics.

"Nemumu, I think it's about time we had something to eat. Could you go order some food downstairs and bring it up to the room?"

"As you wish, Lord Dark," Nemumu said, before adding, "I understand *why* we must engage in this charade, but I do still feel somewhat cheated that we're forced to pay for food that tastes worse than what we could have in the Abyss."

That drew a laugh out of me. "Yeah, you're right there. But we have to be seen to be eating at this inn."

Of course, my team and I could go back to the Abyss any time we wanted and have our fill of all the haute cuisine that came courtesy of my Unlimited Gacha. However, eyebrows would definitely be raised if we'd seen fit to rent out an entire floor of this luxury inn but didn't have a meal here even once. So we made a point of ordering food at the inn every time we returned to our suite.

"As you say, the food we get in the Abyss is amazing, thanks to the ingredients and spices the Unlimited Gacha produces, as well as the gourmet chef it spat out," I agreed. "But compared to my previous life as a dirt poor farm boy, just having food at all is heaven to me."

I closed my eyes and reminisced about my family. "My mom and dad often used to go without food just so that me, my brother, and my sister Yume had something to eat. But there were times when even that wasn't sufficient. So we'd end up just drinking water instead of eating, or head off into the forest to find something—anything—to eat. Even doing that wasn't always enough to keep us from going hungry. Nemumu, did you know that sometimes your stomach can be empty for so long, you don't even feel hunger anymore? Considering what I went through in those days, I'm just thankful I'm able to eat whenever I like."

"Lord Dark, you poor thing..." Nemumu sniffed, wiping the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief. It hadn't been my intention to make her pity me, but it probably shouldn't have come as too much of a surprise that my story would be pretty overwhelming for a girl like her.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Nemumu hurriedly put away her handkerchief and stood to alert. Both of us could sense that it was Gold on the other side of the door, but just to be on the safe side, I donned my mask. Once it was firmly affixed to my face, I nodded at Nemumu to open the door. Gold in his trademark golden armor strolled into the room, though his pace seemed a little quicker than normal. Once Nemumu had shut the door again, I took off my mask and turned to Gold.

"Your drinking party's over sooner than I expected. Was there a problem?"

"Astute as ever, milord," he replied. "A few moments ago, the guild passed on some bally *interesting* news."

According to Gold, while he was sitting drinking with the beastmen, the guild announced to everybody in the building that there had been a spate of killings up in the dungeon. They had no information on the person behind it—no description of them, or their age range, or even what race they were—but apparently, this serial killer had mostly been targeting humans. The dungeon produced magic gems, raw materials garnered from monsters, medicinal herbs, and other valuable resources, which meant it was impossible for the guild to overlook any conduct that would reduce the number of adventurers that had been tasked with bringing back these items. An offense of this magnitude was like throwing sand over a banquet, which explained why the guild was offering a reward for the capture of this criminal.

“The guild is even offering a pretty penny for any information about this blighter. Not that we need the blinkin’ money, of course, what?” said Gold.

“And yet, you came straight back here anyway,” I noted. “Which is probably because, if we were to be the ones who captured this ‘adventurer killer,’ it would propel us up the ranks, correct?”

“Spot on, milord,” Gold said with a grin. “We can identify this rotten scoundrel in minutes if we use your Gift, can’t we?”

“Hm, well, I’m not so sure about that,” I said. “The Unlimited Gacha has given me a bunch of powerful cards, sure, but I don’t remember getting one that’d help me finger a criminal. But if we get others to assist us, and if we make use of the cards we do have at our disposal, I don’t think it’d be too difficult to find this serial killer.” For instance, I could always go back to the Abyss and bring back more people to help us search. And with the Conceal and Flight cards, we’d have a very good chance of catching the culprit in the act. Nemumu enthusiastically jumped in with her own opinion.

“In that case, let’s return to the Abyss and get—” she started, then stopped suddenly. “Lord Dark!”

As Nemumu was speaking, all three of us felt a disturbance inside the suite. I quickly reaffixed my mask, while Gold raised his shield to protect me. A pocket of air in the room began to shimmer before solidifying into some kind of object. At first, it was little more than a hazy miasma, but it eventually took the shape

of a body, and a badly wounded one at that. The bloodied human slowly descended to the floor.

“Miya?!” I exclaimed as I looked down at the red-haired girl who lay unconscious on the floor in front of me. The Wish Bracelet I had given her unraveled and split in half, unlatching itself from her left wrist and falling to the floor as if to indicate that it had done its job.

Chapter 9: Retreat and Encounter

Earlier that same day, before Miya had shown up at the suite in such an unexpected manner, her party had just finished setting up their camp for the night on the first floor of the dungeon when a party of human adventurers called over to them from a distance. One member of this party—which seemed to be made up of full-grown veterans—was waving his arms in a disarming manner as he drew close enough to Elio’s crew to be able to talk to them without having to shout. At first, the teenagers were all tensed up, wondering why another quester would be approaching them, but when the man spoke to Elio’s party, his tone was friendly and completely non-aggressive.

“Sorry, we aren’t here to complain or pick a fight or anything,” he said. “We just figured that, from the looks of your setup here, you kids hadn’t heard the news yet, and as fellow adventurers, we wanted to make sure you got the lowdown.”

According to this man, a large number of adventurers who ventured to the second floor and beyond had been getting slaughtered. It wasn’t particularly unusual for people to die on quests, but the issue in this case was the victims weren’t being killed by monsters—they were being straight-up murdered. The guild had secretly hired a party made up of dwarves and beastfolk to investigate the crime scenes—the ones that had been discovered so far, anyway—and they’d concluded that the victims had all been killed by another adventurer, who was still at large.

“We just happened to be within earshot when the folk in that investigating party came to their conclusion,” the man said. “The beastfolk must’ve already rushed back to the surface by now to report their findings to the guild. The guild’s probably gonna offer a reward for capturing or killing this murderer, so people will be out hunting ’em down, but it’s equally likely that it’ll be a little while before this freak is caught, so my party’s decided against camping in the dungeon overnight. We were just heading for the exit when we spotted you kids over here. For your own sakes, you all should leave the dungeon tonight

too.”

“Th-Thanks for warning us,” said Elio.

“Oh!” Gimra exclaimed suddenly. “So *that’s* why that beastman was running full pelt toward the exit earlier!” Gimra recounted how he’d seen a beastman adventurer galloping past while he was pitching his tent. The beastman had glanced in Gimra’s direction, but he’d carried on hotfooting it to the exit as if he couldn’t be bothered to entertain any distractions, so Gimra and the rest of his party hadn’t thought all that much about it. On hearing Gimra’s account, the man clicked his tongue in disgust.

“Another example of anti-human bigotry. He ran past you without giving you so much as a warning? That total asshole! I mean, is it so hard to at least show *some* decency to your fellow adventurers? I tell ya, the discrimination against our kind is getting beyond unbelievable these days.”

“B-But how do they know those adventurers were murdered?” Elio asked timidly. “They could’ve just been killed by monsters, right?”

The man gave a suave, knowing chuckle, as if acknowledging the astuteness of this question. “Well, it’s simple, actually. We saw the bodies of some of the adventurers that got killed, and there were signs some of the poor bastards had been burned and some frozen by multiple types of magical attacks. Do you think either the second or third floor has any monsters capable of multi-attack magic? And that wasn’t the only thing. We didn’t see any footprints anywhere, apart from the ones left by the victims. And all of these facts have been confirmed by the party that was sent to investigate the deaths. In other words, we’re looking at one or more mages who aren’t just capable of performing tactical magic—they can also fly through the air and bump off adventurers using multi-attack magic. Now do you see why we’re turning tail and fleeing?”

“B-Brother...” Miya whispered as her face went pale. Because she used to attend a magic school, she fully understood the threat they were facing after hearing the man’s account. It seemed there was at *least* one evil mage on the loose that could use flight magic, which was a high-level tactical-class spell. There was no possible way for her party to win against a foe like that. The mage could simply unleash a barrage of magic attacks from the air, and they’d be

sitting ducks.

“Looks like your mage girl has grasped the situation perfectly,” the man said. “Now I’m saying this for your own good: get out of this dungeon while you still can. Don’t even think about camping in here tonight. And be a good neighbor and warn anyone you come across while you’re getting the hell out of here, regardless of what race they are, you hear?”

“S-Sure, you got it!” Elio replied, having seemingly developed a stutter while talking to this adventurer who was roughly twice his age. That man flashed the teenagers another rugged grin before loping off to rejoin his party. Elio’s crew watched the group of men head off toward the dungeon exit before discussing the matter among themselves.

“So what’s the call, boss?” Gimra chirruped. “I thought the reason we came all the way out here was so we could go questing on the second floor. Are we gonna listen to those guys and head back?”

That day, Elio’s party had trekked pretty much the full length of the first floor in search of the stairway to the second floor, taking care to avoid battling any monsters on the way. They had gotten reasonably close to their destination before deciding to set up camp for the night, the plan being to restart their journey in the morning so that they’d arrive at the second floor by around midday. Heading back to the first floor exit after all of that endeavor and when they were so close to their destination would be a disheartening setback. All eyes were on Elio.

“I think we should heed their warning and hike back to the exit,” Elio finally said after a pregnant pause. “I know it sucks to waste all that effort, but it’s not worth risking our lives over.”

“I-I agree with my brother,” Miya piped up.

“Whatever you decide, I’m always on board, boss,” said Gimra. “Whaddaya say, Wordy?” The tall boy nodded silently, making the vote unanimous. Elio sighed with relief knowing that everyone was on his side.

“In that case, let’s get ready to leave. Gimra, you and Wordy take down the tent. Miya and I will pack up our things. We’d better hurry because it won’t be long till the sun sets completely.” Everybody in the party moved quickly once

Elio had issued his orders. Thanks to the fact they'd been friends back in their hometown before becoming adventurers, they were all able to work efficiently as a unit, meaning decamping took roughly fifty percent less time than it usually should, which allowed the party to start heading for the exit in a reasonably timely manner.

"In any case, we'd better get as far away from the second floor stairs as possible," said Elio. "If all those killings are taking place on the second floor, we shouldn't run into the guys responsible for them if we keep our distance from that staircase."

The other members of the party agreed with this logic and carried on trudging toward the first floor exit. Luckily, the group didn't come across any monsters, but their fatigue from a full day of trekking prevented them from making it even half as far as they'd initially hoped by the time it had gotten completely dark, which left them with a dilemma. If Elio's party kept powering on despite their exhaustion, they would leave themselves vulnerable to monster attacks, since they'd likely be too weary to move swiftly enough to fight back.

"So what now, boss?" asked Gimra. "Do we keep going or do we find a safe spot to camp?"

Elio racked his brains in silence as he tried to weigh up which option offered them the most safety, but his train of thought was suddenly interrupted by a sharp, self-important voice from somewhere behind the group.

"What are you people doing all the way out here?"

The four teenagers gulped in surprise. They had been on constant lookout for monsters, yet four hooded figures had appeared behind them, seemingly out of nowhere. Judging by appearances, the figures all seemed to be male. The tallest member of the hooded group—who was standing in the middle of the quartet—was the one who spoke next, and his voice had an affected, ingratiatory cadence to it.

"Now why would you be standing out here in the middle of nowhere?" he asked. "Did you run into some trouble, perchance?"

"N-No, no trouble," said Elio. "We were just tired so we decided to take a breather."

Miya poked Elio in the back. “Brother, tell them,” she murmured.

“Huh? Oh, right!” Elio said, remembering that the man they’d met earlier had told them to warn other adventurers about the serial killer on the loose, regardless of their race. He promptly started relaying this news to the hooded men. “Um, have you heard about the serial killer who’s going around the dungeon, killing other adventurers?”

“A serial killer?” the tall hooded male queried, looking puzzled. This reaction prompted Elio to outline the situation as thoroughly as he could, including telling them that there were potentially multiple offenders, that there was evidence tactical magic had been used to kill the victims, and that a reward had been offered for the capture of the killer or killers. Elio added that staying in the dungeon overnight probably wasn’t safe until the ones responsible for these murders had been caught or killed. The shorter male—who had been the one who’d first called out to Elio’s party—nodded appreciatively throughout as the teenager recounted everything he’d been told.

“Ah, *now* I get it,” he said. “You were all in the middle of returning to the surface world to get yourself out of harm’s way.”

“Yes, we were,” Elio confirmed. “What about your party?”

“We were actually out hunting for prey, as it happens,” the shorter man replied. “We happened to notice you over here and thought something might be wrong, so we decided to come over and check on you to make sure everything was all right.”

“Okay, well, sorry for making you worry,” Elio said. He relaxed, thinking this was just another regular band of adventurers, but that sense of everything being fine was quickly and definitively punctured by the next words that came out of the hooded men’s mouths.

“Never imagined that guild would get their act together so quickly,” said the shorter man of the two.

“It is indeed surprising,” the taller man agreed. “If we had known the guild was so upstanding and diligent in its duties, we would have done more to hide the evidence.”

“Huh?” By this point, Elio could practically *feel* the unmistakably homicidal vibes emanating from these two men. The shorter of the two pulled back his hood, and slowly drew the giant broadsword strapped to his back.

“Well, anyway, for tonight’s entertainment, we’ll squash these miserable insects,” Kyto said with an eerie sneer. The elf gripped the hilt of the Grandius with both hands and held it aloft, relishing the hunt that was about to ensue.

Chapter 10: Her Brother's Tenacity

On one side was a Level 1500 elf armed with the Grandius, a phantasma-class legendary sword, while on the other was a bunch of teenage rookie adventurers. It was obvious who was going to emerge victorious from this battle. The boys drew their swords to protect Miya, but within a matter of minutes, they lay strewn across the ground, slashed and mutilated. Still clutching her staff tightly, Miya let out a series of spasmodic, tearful screams. Kyto—who didn't have a speck of blood on him despite his grisly deed—activated his stats screen and saw results that disappointed him as usual.

"Tch, guess these brats were too puny to raise my level," he muttered.

"Pardon me, Mr. Kyto," Yanaaq interjected. "But I thought we were supposed to be collecting inferiors to use as test subjects. Yet here you are, hacking them all to pieces. They are no use to me as lab animals if you go killing them!"

"Those insects had the *nerve* to attack me first!" Kyto raged. "I seem to remember telling you I'd go insane if I didn't kill any and all inferiors who dared to resist me, a proud elf, and you even agreed with me. In any case, I did leave one of those *things* alive for you."

Miya shrieked as Kyto shifted his piercing glare toward her. Yanaaq also turned in her direction and regarded her with an air of fascination.

"An inferior mage is certainly a rare specimen, but those young boys would have made favorable experimental subjects as well. You are correct, Mr. Kyto, when you say I saw eye-to-eye with you when you expressed those views, but doesn't this serve to show how very quick to anger you are?"

"Fine, fine, you win. I'll remember to be a bit more careful next time. But before we take her back with us, how about we have some *fun* with her first?"

"Hm? What are you suggesting?" It was a question asked in all sincerity, for Yanaaq had no idea what Kyto was alluding to.

"We've been questing in this stupid dungeon for days and haven't gotten laid

once. She might just be some frumpy inferior, but I'm sure she's got a hole between her legs, so she can at least be useful for blowing off some steam."

"Oh, I see your meaning now," Yanaaq said. "Then there is no need to include me in this. I'm afraid I do not share the same carnal desires as you, and that goes for females of my own race as well as inferiors."

"Oh?" Kyto said, raising an eyebrow. "Well, I'm still gonna use her anyway."

"By all means, go ahead. I'll give you some space while you go about your 'business.' Be sure to call me back over when you are done." Yanaaq started leading the two other hooded members away to allow Kyto some privacy. The elf turned to Miya once more and began to walk toward her.

"N-No, stay back..." Miya gasped as she slowly backed away, still gripping her staff tightly. This reaction was met with an extremely puzzled look from Kyto.

"You are about to be of benefit to a future legendary hero," he stated loftily. "Besides, consorting with an elf is the highest honor a female inferior like you could ever wish for. So why are you running away from me in fear? You should be crying with joy at being given this opportunity."

Leaving aside Kyto's dubious claim that he was a "future legendary hero," the mistaken idea that human women would feel "honored" to fornicate with an elf was solely the product of the elves' prejudice for "inferiors." No human woman would willingly consort with any man who insulted her so nakedly, no matter how good looking he was. Despite this self-evident fact, male elves assumed that simply flirting with a human woman would lead to her immediately begging the elf to make love to her. This was perhaps a consequence of how much pride the elves took in their appearance.

"M-Miya..." a voice gasped. "Run for it..." A strangled noise of pain followed these words.

"Brother!" Miya cried.

On hearing this exchange, Kyto turned his head to see Elio standing upright with the help of his sword, which he was using like a cane. Elio had a deep wound in his abdomen where the elf had slashed him earlier, and blood was gushing from it and pooling at the teenager's feet. Normally, an injury that bad

would've rendered a human incapable of moving, much less able to stand, but Elio had quested in the dungeon long enough to raise his power level, which had granted him a hardiness and strength of will beyond that of the average human. Another thing that had gone in Elio's favor is that, unlike Gimra and Wordy who'd had limbs lopped off in addition to their torsos getting carved up, he'd only suffered a stomach wound. Elio's unexpected revival appeared to thrill Yanaaq.

"What magnificent vitality!" the dark elf exclaimed. "Mr. Kyto, we must capture this inferior alive! He'll make an *excellent* test subject!"

Elio ignored Yanaaq's gleeful appeals to his partner and turned toward his biggest obstacle, Kyto—though this simple movement was enough to cause him to hack up blood. The teenager instinctively knew he wasn't going to survive. The fact he was even able to stand at all was nothing short of a miracle. The foe in front of him was infinitely more powerful than him, and that was even before you factored in that there were three other bad guys surrounding him. In this hopeless situation, there was only one thing he could do with the last shreds of his strength: protect his sister. Elio lifted up his sword and shield.

"Miya, run!" Elio shouted to his sister before coughing up even more blood.

"Brother!" Even knowing only certain death awaited Elio, Miya choked back her tears and made a break for it. Kyto reflexively tutted at her attempt to escape.

"What the hell are you running for? I really wish you inferior insects would stop wasting my time!" Kyto grumbled. He had no choice but to capture or kill Miya. Letting her get away alive wasn't an option—not after she'd seen their faces. Kyto was almost certain Miya wouldn't be able to run all the way to the dungeon exit, but there was a good chance she could bump into some other adventurers on the way and tell them what she'd witnessed, which would obviously make things a lot messier. That's why Kyto sorely wanted to chase after Miya, but he couldn't because Elio—who was hanging on to life by a thread—charged toward the elf with his sword swinging.

"You half-dead cockroach!" Kyto yelled. "Stay out of my way!" The Level 1500 elf easily deflected Elio's sword with his arm without it so much as breaking the

skin. But Elio's attack had successfully stopped Kyto in his tracks, giving Miya the precious time she needed to flee.

"Mr. Kyto! Mr. Kyto!" Yanaaq bleated. "Please do not kill that boy!"

Kyto clicked his tongue, annoyed he couldn't just put this inferior out of his misery and be done with it. Since Yanaaq was clearly fascinated with Elio and ecstatic at the prospect of using him as his test subject, Kyto would have to incapacitate the human instead—which wasn't a difficult task by any means, just more time-consuming than simply slaughtering him. And well, the longer it took to deal with this boy, the likelier it was that another party might stumble onto the scene to further complicate matters. So the elf came to the conclusion that the best thing to do was to immobilize Elio quickly and give chase to his sister. Gripping the Grandius with both hands, Kyto held it aloft and prepared to stun Elio by striking him with the flat of the blade, but an unforeseen development made him hesitate. Elio had lost a huge amount of blood and was clearly about to black out, but he kept muttering something under his breath.

"There's no rule saying a shield can't be used to attack... Shields aren't only meant to protect... Don't just swing a sword willy-nilly... Use your noggin to annoy your opponent and hit them with surprise attacks..."

"Wh-What's wrong with you, creep?" Kyto yelled, a look of disgust warping his usually handsome features. But what the elf didn't know was that Elio was repeating what Gold had taught the teenager's party during his fighting lessons, and Kyto's revulsion at this babbling had created an opening.

Elio hurled his sword at Kyto like a javelin—a move the elf hadn't anticipated. What's more, Kyto's disgust at Elio's mumblings had managed to slow him down a beat, meaning the elf didn't have time to swat Elio's sword away with his Grandius or deflect the weapon with his arm again. This time, his natural reflexes kicked in and he tilted his head to one side to dodge the sword—an action that was the result of years of training with the White Knights.

But Elio wasn't finished yet. Matching Kyto's movement, Elio swung his shield around and bashed the elf straight in the face, drawing a grunt of pain out of him. It was a simple shield hit which inflicted zero damage on Kyto, but the blow was hard enough to make the Level 1500 elf fall backwards onto his rear.

For a boy with a power level that didn't even surpass the twenty mark, it was a feat worthy of being called a victory, and an upset to boot. Elio looked down at Kyto with a triumphant grin on his face. The elf wasn't imagining this debacle.



“D-Don’t go thinking you’re better than me, inferior!” Kyto screamed, jumping up with the Grandius in hand, as if trying to style out his unlikely close-combat error. He ran Elio through with his sword and forced him to the ground before kicking him repeatedly in the side to inflict more pain to the boy while he was still conscious.

“I’ll make you suffer before you die, you filthy, inferior *bastard!*” the elf screamed madly. “How *dare* you bruise my beautiful face!”

“M-Mr. Kyto! You promised you would capture him alive!” Yanaaq cried as he ran over to Kyto with the intent of calming the elf down and applying healing magic to Elio to save this potential test subject. But Kyto was still incensed, and he continued to kick Elio and attempted to stab him with his sword, preventing Yanaaq from doing so. The pair spent the next few minutes struggling and interfering with each other’s plans for the boy until they remembered Miya was still on the loose.



Miya’s lungs were on fire as she gasped for air, but even though her legs felt like they were about to give out, she didn’t dare stop running into the darkness because she was terrified she might be killed next. What also kept her feet moving was her sense of obligation to her brother, who had sacrificed himself to give her an opportunity to escape.

I have to... I have to find someone and tell them about the serial killers! Maybe I can still save my brother! Even though in the back of her mind, Miya knew Elio had almost zero chance of surviving, she still clung to the small sliver of hope that he’d somehow make it out alive. Unfortunately for her, a voice nearby transformed that hope into abject despair.

“You’re just like your brother, trying to make a fool out of a future legendary hero. The way you inferiors fail to show even an ounce of respect for someone superior to you is exactly why I despise your kind.”

Kyto appeared in midair in front of Miya, wielding his Grandius sword and blocking the girl’s path.

“What? B-But how...” Miya managed to stutter between ragged breaths. She

couldn't believe her eyes.

Kyto was standing atop a floating clone of the Grandius. The elf swung the phantasma-class weapon in his hands, and the sound it made as it sliced through the air resembled a musical refrain. More Grandius clones appeared, which Kyto arranged to form a staircase from where he was standing down to the ground. It had been these flying copies that had allowed Kyto, Yanaaq, and the shady researcher's first test subject to escape the Dark Elf Islands by crossing the sea on them all the way to the mainland. Kyto had used this exact same trick to head off Miya despite her head start, and also deployed it to soundlessly sneak up on the veteran adventurers camping on the third floor that he subsequently killed.

The one who wields the Grandius is able to produce and operate these sword clones at will. The copies are wide enough for a person to glide along atop one of them, which is how Kyto had easily caught up with Miya—by literally flying through the air. In addition to that, the clones are imbued with random types of attack magic, and the number that can be produced at any one time can increase depending on the skills of the wielder of the Grandius. The reason Kyto was able to strike Suvellan through the smokescreen was because the elf had produced a Grandius clone and this aerial vehicle had given Kyto an eagle-eye view of the scene. He'd tracked Suvellan running out of the billowing smoke, before using other clones to knock Suvellan senseless.

Kyto descended the Grandius clone staircase and stood in front of Miya with an irritated look on his face.

"You and your brother had the gall to waste the precious time of a future legendary hero. And not only did your brother dare to get in my way, he also embarrassed me in the process. The only reason why I didn't kill him where he stood is because Yanaaq promised he'd run experiments on him that are worse than death. But I'm still extremely *pissed* at you worthless insects. I'll make you answer for what your asshole brother did to me! But I'm not going to kill you here. I'll save that for when we carve both of you up in the lab. What I *will* do now is use you *thoroughly* for my own personal gratification!"

As Kyto advanced on her, Miya started mentally preparing herself for all the suffering that was about to come her way, as well as the eventual miserable

death that awaited her and her brother. In this world full of monsters and anti-human bigotry, the threat of death had become an intrinsic part of life for people like her. Because of that, when Miya had decided to make her living as an adventurer together with her brother and their friends, she'd already made peace with the very real likelihood that she could die while questing. In this moment, as Kyto walked toward her, fear and hopelessness overwhelmed her mind, but due to the fact she had long been prepared for death, she decided her best option was to fight back with the most powerful weapon in her arsenal.

"Magic power, heed me thrice! Manifest to blades of ice! Ice Swords!" she chanted.

Three large, sharply-pointed icicles—her weapons of last resort—appeared and floated around Miya. Both Kyto and Miya had sword-like objects hovering around them now.

"Ice Sword! Strike my enemy!" Miya yelled, ordering one of the icicles to fly toward Kyto.

"There's no point delaying the inevitable," Kyto mocked her. He stood motionless as he manipulated one of the hovering Grandius clones with his mind and sent it to intercept the Ice Sword. But the attack had distracted Kyto long enough for Miya to take off at a run again.

My brother and my friends sacrificed themselves so I could get away, Miya thought. I'm not going to give up either! Not until I've told someone about these serial killers!

"Tch, you inferiors really like to make things difficult, don't you?" Kyto spat. "Fine, have it your way. Maybe chopping off one of your legs will teach you to stand still!"

"G-Go away!" Miya fired off another of her Ice Swords, but Kyto swatted away this projectile as effortlessly as he had the first.

I have to tell him! Miya thought as she sprinted. *If I tell him, I know he can beat this serial killer. He might be human and younger than me, but Dark's able to use tactical magic without voicing the spell. I just know he'll be able to bring down this serial—eek!*

Kyto had sent a sword clone hurtling toward Miya to slice off one of her legs, but at the last second, she instinctively moved the last of her Ice Swords with her mind into a position where it could partially deflect the clone. Thanks to this stroke of luck, Miya was able to keep both of her legs, albeit with one sustaining a deep gash that bled heavily and left her unable to walk, much less run. Miya collapsed to the ground, and even though she had no more tricks up her sleeve, she glared defiantly up at Kyto.

“I was trying to chop off your leg, but I guess your little Ice Sword got in the way,” Kyto said. “Well, at least we won’t have you running away anymore. Now, be a good little inferior and spread those legs for the future legendary hero.”

“Y-You’re not legendary *or* a hero!” Miya yelled, before drawing her knife, grasping it in both hands and pointing it at Kyto. Tears of dread welled up in her eyes, but Miya kept up her desperate resistance, even though she knew she couldn’t possibly win.

“Dark’s the *real* future legendary hero. He’s human and he’s younger than me, but he defeated a Fourscythe Mantis using unvoiced tactical magic. You’re just a *loser* who gets a kick out of bullying people weaker than you. You’ll never be a legend or a hero!”

Kyto froze, unable to respond. From the elf’s perspective, Miya knew damn well she had no hope of escape, and that the only fate awaiting her was to become Yanaaq’s test subject and finally meet her demise when he’d finished playing with her. Yet instead of begging for mercy, this girl had said something that had cut him extraordinarily deep. If Miya’s words hadn’t been so devastatingly accurate, Kyto would’ve had no reason to pause at such a critical moment. Yet hesitate he did, for he knew in his heart of hearts that he *was* a failure—a loser who had been unceremoniously booted off the ladder that led upwards to glory. Miya had shut up this prideful elf by reopening a very sore wound and rubbing salt into it. And this came off the back of her brother seriously wounding the elf’s ego with his shield bash.

“Sh-Shut up! Shut up! Shut *up*! You goddamn inferior! You goddamn inferior! You goddamn *inferior*!” Kyto bellowed, finally erupting like a supervolcano. Gripping the Grandius with both hands and holding it aloft, he leapt toward the wounded girl armed only with a small knife and swung the giant sword down at

her with all his might.

“That’s it! You’re dead, you useless insect!” Kyto screamed at her. Miya sobbed silently, closed her eyes, and waited for the end. Though, at that moment, she made a silent wish.

If only... If only I could tell Dark—the real future legendary hero and the great hope of all humans—who this serial killer is... He would surely defeat this elf... Dark!

The Grandius came swinging down full force toward Miya’s skull, but instead of hitting its target, the blade ended up striking only earth, because a minor miracle had occurred. The SSR Wish Bracelet Miya was wearing had emitted a blinding flash of light, and the girl had disappeared instantly.

“What?! H-Huh?” Kyto stuttered, utterly dumbfounded. This development was so unexpected, the Level 1500 elf completely forgot his previous rage at being called a “loser,” and it occurred to him that he had somehow just lost an eyewitness who could provide a description of his party to anyone who might wish to hunt them down.

At a complete loss over what had just happened, all Kyto could do for the next few minutes was stare agog at the spot where the girl had been as the dust settled in front of him.

Chapter 11: The Hunt for the Adventurer Killers, Part 1

“I see. So the serial killers are an elf and a dark elf who wear hoods to hide their identities.”

Miya—the girl who had given me the burn salve as a gift—had suddenly appeared out of thin air in the suite my party and I were staying in. After floating down to the floor of the room, the bracelet she’d been wearing on her left wrist had snapped off and fallen to the ground. Of course, I knew this was because the bracelet was the SSR Wish Bracelet I’d given her in return for the salve, and it was undoubtedly the reason for her showing up magically in my room. Her clothes were all dirty and she had a very deep cut on her leg, indicating she must have been in some kind of trouble before being transported here.

After using a few gacha cards to remove the dirt from her clothes and heal her wound, I used my SR Hypnosis card to have her recount everything that had happened to her in detail. The Hypnosis card allowed the user to put someone in a trance and manipulate them, but it wasn’t without its faults. For example, it didn’t work very well against people with high power levels, and the hypnotized person always had a dazed look on their face, so it was instantly obvious to anyone looking at them that they were under a spell. The card did however prove especially useful in drawing information out of a low-level mage like Miya. From her prone position on the sofa, she told us everything.

According to her account, they had run into an elf calling himself a “legendary hero” and a dark elf who referred to humans as “lab animals.” Both were hooded and it seemed like they were the ones stalking around the dungeon attacking adventurers and straight-up murdering them. Miya’s party had been set upon by the hooded elf, and her brother and the other two boys had suffered some grisly-sounding injuries. Miya had tried desperately to flee so that she could tell someone what she’d seen, but the elf had ultimately caught

up to her and was just about to slay her when the Wish Bracelet activated itself and teleported her to my suite. She didn't know what had happened to the rest of her party after that.

After hearing her account of events, I put her to sleep with my SR Slumber card. This card also wasn't very effective against anyone high-level, and it wasn't particularly user-friendly either, but it would allow Miya to sleep untroubled for a good twenty-four hours. Once all that was done, I let out a faint sigh.

"It could only have been the SSR Wish Bracelet that brought Miya to our room," I surmised. "And it only worked because she was in mortal danger and made a desperate wish to tell me what she knew. I never thought this would be how I'd discover the true power of the bracelet."

When I'd experimented with the bracelet back in the Abyss, all of my tests were a bust. The description given by my Appraisal power hadn't been all that clear either: "If one wishes hard enough, it will create a minor miracle." Apparently, "wishes hard enough" translated to "pleading with your life on the line," if what happened to Miya was anything to go by.

Could it be any less user-friendly? I thought. But leaving that annoying aspect of it aside, it seemed the card was very powerful indeed. Miya wished that she could tell me about the serial killers, and the card granted her wish by teleporting her to my room at the inn, even though I hadn't told her where I was staying. It wasn't an SSR card for nothing, that's for sure, and I felt this event could very well be classed as a "minor miracle."

"So, milord, what do we do next?" asked Gold.

"Well, obviously, we're going after these serial killers," I said after a brief pause. "We were just discussing how we were going to track them down and raise our rank, and now we have all the clues we need to find them."

As of this moment, my party was D-rank, and there was little we could do to ascend through the ranks quickly. For once, our difficulty didn't actually stem from anti-human discrimination—it was down to the fact we hadn't been active as registered adventurers for long enough. According to the guild, in order to go up a rank, we needed to continue questing for at least a year or pull off a feat

that would convince everybody of our prowess. I figured getting the reward money for hauling in these serial killers dead or alive would fit the bill as one such “feat.”

“And besides, Elio, Gimra, and Wordy didn’t deserve a fate as cruel as that,” I continued. “I can count the number of times I spoke to those guys on one hand, but I know they were hard-working adventurers, uncorrupted by this hate-filled world, who strived with all their might to earn money for Miya’s sake. They were just doing all they could to survive in this senseless world...”

Gimra had been a mischievous kid who always blurted out whatever was on his mind, but beneath that impish veneer was a boy who always looked out for his friends. Wordy had been the silent type who rarely uttered a word, but could always be seen surveying his surroundings while in the dungeon to make sure his comrades didn’t walk blindly into danger. Elio had been the one I’d felt closest to, since we were both older brothers who doted on our little sisters. Miya had meant the world to Elio, and he’d wanted the best for her, which was why he had banded together with his pals to battle monsters. I had nothing but respect for that decision. But that wasn’t my biggest regret.

“If we’d met in another time and in another place, I know we could’ve become close friends,” I murmured forlornly.

I’d vowed to take revenge on the Concord of the Tribes for trying to assassinate me, and find out the reason behind their betrayal, yet despite all of this baggage, I’d felt a special attachment to those kids. I truly believed that if I’d met them while I was leading a peaceful life back in my village—long before I’d sworn my oath of vengeance—we could’ve all been firm friends. But that dream had faded as quickly as it had floated up, like bubbles in a stream.

“Lord Light...” Nemumu said, unintentionally blurting out my real name with tears in her eyes. She pressed her hands to her chest, as if someone had gouged out her heart with a knife. She obviously empathized with my pain after seeing how distraught I was on learning the fate of this party of teenagers. I quickly deflated her vicarious sorrow by unleashing my pent-up rage.

“Are we just going to capture those killers, hand them over to the guild, and give the elves and dark elves the opportunity to send their top brass down to

intervene and set them free? No, no, no, I won't let that happen. They will receive no such mercy if I can help it. I swear on my name that they will suffer dearly for what they have done." I clenched my fists tightly, my whole body gripped by an unquenchable wrath for those who kill humans just because they feel like it.

I continued my rant, working myself up into a lather. "I'll kill them on the spot. I'll gather all the evidence, force them to confess to their crimes, then make them feel the same pain Elio's party felt before putting them out of their misery. I'll take their blood-soaked corpses back as proof that I was the one who killed them so that we can raise our rank. I'll make them pay for what they did to Elio, Gimra, Wordy, and Miya. I'll make them pay for slaying all of those human adventurers. Mark my words, they will pay the ultimate price!"

On uttering these final words, the air in the room became so strained, you could almost hear it creaking. Even the walls seemed to be reverberating from the enraged, murderous vibes emanating from me like hot magma. If Miya hadn't been asleep at that moment, her heart would've undoubtedly stopped out of fright at the sight. That was how much this hooded elf and dark elf infuriated me. I called out to my two fighters with my back still turned to them.

"Gold. Nemumu. Are we clear? We must find those two serial killers before someone else captures them," I told them.

Gold and Nemumu swiftly knelt. Nemumu swallowed back her tears, and the solemn oath she spoke to me next was in a voice that was every bit as beautiful as her looks, though it had an icy edge to it that was befitting of a top assassin. She made it sound as if she were offering up her very soul to a god.

"I swear upon my absolute and unwavering loyalty and servitude to the most exalted Lord Light that I, the Assassin's Blade Nemumu, will find these foul wretches without fail and set upon them like a hound sent from Hell!"

Like the true knight that he was, Gold had dropped to one knee and bowed his head low as he reaffirmed his allegiance to the ruler he adored and respected.

"I am the Auric Knight Gold. In accordance with my golden chivalric code, I will thwart any being who threatens to deny my lord's supremacy, and with my

blade, I will strike down all who oppose you! I offer my absolute golden fealty to my one true master!”

As I looked down at my two kneeling fighters, I donned my Fool’s Mask once more. “Then let’s move out. The time has come to slaughter this elf and dark elf who arrogantly believed they could kill humans for fun and get away with it.”

“As you command, Lord Light!” Nemumu piped up.

“I am at your disposal, milord!” Gold declared.

My team and I instantly readied ourselves for battle. Before heading off to the dungeon, I used the SSR Teleportation card to transport the sleeping Miya to the bottom level of the Abyss, and communicated to Mei that she should be treated as my guest while I was away. While Miya would remain asleep for twenty-four hours, I couldn’t leave her alone in my suite. I wasn’t going to risk one of the inn staff entering my room and seeing her there. Once all that had been dealt with, my team and I made a beeline for the dungeon. Luckily for us, the dungeon was open around the clock. While the number of adventurers who entered or left the dungeon late at night wasn’t huge, it was still more than zero.

We made our way inside the dungeon, and the sky in there was every bit as dark as it had been out on the surface world, with a blanket of stars creating a picture-perfect tableau above us. We set about trekking to a secluded area, like we always did on entering the dungeon.

“SSR Clairvoyance—release.” Thanks to Miya’s detailed account, I was able to use the Clairvoyance card to find the location of the killers. This card granted the user the ability to find and locate any object remotely, but it wouldn’t work if the target was ill-defined or if the user didn’t have a clear idea of what they were looking for. I recalled the physical descriptions Miya had given me and used the Clairvoyance card to locate the ones who’d attacked her party.

“Found them. One of them has gone back to where the boys are lying, and it seems like he’s looking for something. Probably thinks that’s where Miya went.” Not far away from the elf stood the dark elf and two other hooded men, one of which had Elio flung over his shoulder. Now that I knew exactly what they looked like, there was no way I would let them get away. I reiterated my

intentions to my team.

“We’ve found our prey. Now, let the hunt for the adventurer killers begin.”

Chapter 12: The Hunt for the Adventurer Killers, Part 2

“Dammit! Dammit! Goddammit! Where’d that little bitch run off to?”

Kyto the elf was frantic by this point. He’d been kidnapping and killing mostly human adventurers in the hopes—however remote—that Yanaaq’s research might find a solution to the conundrum of how to surpass one’s growth limit, and it had been this motive that had driven Kyto to attack Elio’s party on this night. He’d allowed one member of the party to escape, however.

Kyto, a Level 1500 elf, had allowed a human girl whose power level was probably no higher than twenty to escape his grasp. Of course, there were mitigating factors to consider, like the girl prodding an extremely sore spot, which had enraged him to such an extent that he’d attempted to slaughter her with the Grandius—but none of that changed the fact that, just as the phantasma-class weapon looked set to cleave Miya’s skull in twain, she’d suddenly disappeared in a flash of light and the mighty broadsword ended up striking the ground where she had been. This phenomenon was so unexpected and *unexplainable* that all a dazed Kyto could do was stand rooted to the spot for a good minute or more.

It took a while to dawn on Kyto that this wasn’t just a case of a weakling embarrassing him by escaping his clutches. No, this particular girl had a full description of them—the serial killers everyone would soon be hunting down—including what race they were, their characteristics, and what weapons they use. Kyto hurriedly made a Grandius clone and hopped aboard it to get an aerial view of the immediate vicinity, but he couldn’t find hide nor hair of the girl—nor of any other adventurer, for that matter. As he flew through the air, Kyto chewed on his thumbnail.

“No sign of anybody in the area,” Kyto said to himself. “A magic item couldn’t be hiding her nearby, because my keen senses would’ve tracked her down already. Then, maybe it was some kind of teleportation item that whisked her

somewhere far away? Maybe even out of this dungeon?! No, that can't be right! It's just not possible. That mangy little inferior brat would never have a valuable magic item like that on her! If she did, why would she wait until the very last minute to use it?!"

The human girl had been running for her life. If Kyto had been in her shoes, he would've used an item like that immediately, regardless of how invaluable it was.

"That bright light may have been a distraction so she could escape, just like the smoke bomb trick that inferior pulled the other night. But I can't sense her *anywhere* around here..." Kyto muttered, seemingly at a loss. "Oh, wait! Maybe she went back to her friends!"

Kyto had been focusing his search for Miya in the direction of the dungeon exit, unconsciously believing that she'd be heading that way because that was what he would do in her position.

"She wanted to make me *think* she was heading for the dungeon exit, but in reality, she went back to her party! She obviously planned to grab her brother from under Yanaaq's nose and use another handy little item to escape us once more! Dammit! These inferior insects are weaker than sin, but they can be tricky little pests!"

It should've been plainly evident that there was no point in Miya risking her life to attempt this kind of rescue mission, but Kyto felt this extremely unlikely scenario was plausible enough to help him rationalize the fact that he'd let a helpless human girl escape his grasp. Kyto frantically changed direction and hurtled toward Yanaaq, who was busy treating Elio's wounds.

Anyone could've told you it would be virtually impossible for what was clearly a young group of fledgling adventurers to be in possession of a rare teleportation item. You'd usually only find items like that in the hands of a member of a royal—or at the very least, aristocratic—family, or perhaps a top-level adventurer, or maybe even a wealthy merchant. An item as powerful as that would also be kept at the ready at all times in case the owner found themselves in a situation that required a very speedy escape. Teleportation items were so rare, they never showed up in auctions, and if one actually were

to go up for sale, the money you'd need to buy it would be enough for a commoner to live on for decades. Because teleportation items were such rare and valuable commodities, it would normally be unthinkable for a group of rookie adventurers to possess one. It would've made much more sense to believe that Kyto had simply got unlucky and lost sight of Miya, allowing her the time she needed to flee.

It only took Kyto a few minutes of gliding on his Grandius clone to get back to where Yanaaq was.

"Oh, Mr. Kyto. That was faster than expected," Yanaaq said on seeing the elf return. "Did you bring that inferior mage back with you? I *do* hope you didn't lose your cool and end up killing her."

"Tch, she's not here." Kyto didn't even bother answering Yanaaq's question, the agitated elf instead gaining altitude again and circling the area in search of Miya—but there was no one else in the immediate vicinity. The sword-surfing elf looked high and low for the girl, even dropping down to ground level on the off-chance she'd found a good hiding place in the undergrowth, but he wasn't able to sense anyone nearby, not even a monster. Kyto's rather erratic behavior tipped Yanaaq off that something was amiss, prompting the dark elf to approach his partner.

"Mr. Kyto, what happened to the inferior mage that ran off? I would certainly be disappointed if you killed her in a fit of passion, but I would never be angry at you. It's true that she would have made an excellent test subject—possibly one of the best I could hope for—but it wasn't *absolutely* necessary for me to have her..." The dark elf trailed off. Kyto's only response was silence, his brow creased in frustration even as Yanaaq extended this olive branch to him. This reaction made Yanaaq fear that the worst-case scenario may have come to pass.

"Mr. Kyto, *please* don't tell me you let her escape," the dark elf said cautiously. Kyto answered this by turning stiff as a board and going pale. Yanaaq was aghast. "Even knowing that she was a mage, are you telling me that you—a member of the elite White Knights—let that little girl *escape*?!"

"Shut the hell up!" Kyto yelled. "It's not *my* fault! I didn't know that brat had a

teleportation item on her! It was unforeseeable! That filthy little wench had an item none of the White Knights possess!”

“I cannot believe she managed to evade you...” Yanaaq uttered. “And you say she had a magic teleportation item?”

“She activated it just as I was swinging the Grandius at her! This bright light appeared, and then she was gone! Gone, I tell you!” Kyto babbled. “I couldn’t find her in the immediate area, so I came back here to look for her, but nothing! She’s nowhere to be found! The only rational explanation is that she teleported away!”

“Mr. Kyto...” the dark elf said slowly and deliberately. “This doesn’t bode well for us.”

On hearing Yanaaq say this, Kyto bit his lip because he agreed with this assessment. Miya’s escape meant it was only a matter of time before the authorities in Kyto’s homeland—the Elven Queendom—caught wind of him slaughtering adventurers in this dungeon. Kyto was aiding Yanaaq in his research to discover the secret to negating a person’s growth limit, and to that end Kyto had gone as far as stealing the Grandius from the queendom to free the dark elf from his incarceration and the death sentence that was hanging over him. The Elven Queendom was sparing no effort in its hunt for Kyto as they attempted to recover the legendary sword. To ward off their pursuers, Kyto and Yanaaq had chosen to squirrel themselves away inside this Dwarf Kingdom dungeon, believing it to be a good hiding place due to this nation being on bad terms with the queendom over this disputed border asset.

But with Miya on the loose, the guild would soon know who was killing all their adventurers, and this report would surely reach the ears of the queendom. The queendom’s most elite soldiers, the White Knights, would then be assigned to quietly retrieve the Grandius in a way that would mean the monarchy wouldn’t suffer any disgrace over this, nor be forced into offering political concessions.

“Dammit! Those accursed White Knights!” Kyto spat. “Does that mean that son of a bitch commander’s gonna come charging in here?” The elf clicked his tongue as the composed visage of his unflappable former boss floated up

before his mind's eye. A chill shot down his spine.

The leader of the White Knights was rumored to have a power level that was over 3000, while the other White Knights had power levels that easily surpassed Kyto's own level of 1500, some of whom were even above the 2000 mark. What's more, all of them would be armed with weapons and protective gear every bit as powerful as the Grandius, which meant this squad would waste no time in annihilating Kyto—giving the elf zero opportunity to resist—and burying all the evidence. Naturally, Yanaaq would meet the same fate.

“Damn it! Damn it! Damn it all!” Kyto yelled. “Why must a future legendary hero like me suffer that fate?! This isn't how it should go!”

“Yes, you are quite right there,” Yanaaq said. “If my research had borne fruit by now, there would be no need for us to fear the White Knights or any of the assassins sent by the Dark Elf Islands, but I am afraid my research is still incomplete. However, we can use this experience as a lesson to inform our future endeavors. Now I suggest we leave this dungeon before that inferior mage tells someone about us and the guards decide to block the exit. Let's use the Grandius to relocate so that I can resume my research.”

Kyto brightened up at this suggestion. “That's it! With the Grandius's power of flight, we aren't bound by borders! Maybe next, we should go to the human nation and have our pick of inferiors. No, better yet, a demonkin feudal domain, so we can get as far from the queendom as possible.”

“I'm afraid you guys aren't going anywhere.”

Kyto and Yanaaq jumped at the sound of this voice that was both clear and youthful, yet darker than a tar pit and more ominous. The duo hurriedly took a few steps back, but before they knew it, a group of humans was standing in front of them. This party consisted of a knight in golden armor, who was a head taller than Kyto; a beautiful girl with a scarf covering her mouth, whose hair was so silvery-white, it shone brightly in the blackness of the night; and a human boy wearing a fool's mask, who had a full-length black cloak draped around him that seemed to blend into the darkness.

H-How did these people just show up here? Kyto thought. *We're standing in the middle of a meadow with nothing obstructing our view. At the very least, we*

should've been able to spot that flashy golden armor from a distance. Are they able to drop out of the sky, like I can? But a Level 1500 elf like me should've definitely noticed them coming, so how did they do it?"

Kyto had the ability to sneak up on adventurers and attack them without making a sound, but the tables had been turned. The elf had zero clue how these humans had managed to pull this trick, and he would remain forever ignorant of the fact the boy had used the SR Flight and SSR Conceal gacha cards—two items capable of higher-level magic than whatever artifice the elf used.

The masked boy continued addressing Kyto. “Now that I’ve gotten a closer look at you, I see you’re the same guys who tried to cut in line the first day we came to this dungeon. I never imagined you’d be capable of straight-up murdering adventurers too.”

“Oh, now you mention it, I’m starting to recall their voices and mannerisms, what?” said the golden knight. “Jolly impressive, milord, remembering these blighters even though we last ran into them nearly a month ago.”

“That’s Lord Dark for you! You have an *excellent* memory!” said the girl who looked like a fairy princess. This last statement by the boy—who was apparently called “Dark”—jogged Kyto’s memory as well.

Oh! These are the rude inferiors who dared to rebuke me when I first came to this dungeon! The recollection of the humiliation he’d felt that day quickly gave way to the lascivious thoughts he’d had about the tanned, silver-haired beauty, and how he’d wanted to seduce her and make her his “special attendant.” These lust-driven intentions momentarily lit a fire in Kyto, but he knew he didn’t have time to deal with these humans right at this minute—not with the mage girl still wandering around unchecked. Leaving this dungeon immediately was their top priority.

While Kyto was busy trying to contend with his libido, Yanaaq launched into some mealy-mouthed excuse about why they were there, in an attempt to refute the accusation of murder this party of humans had made against them. “There appears to be some misunderstanding. We are not responsible for the bodies you see before you. We simply came over to this spot because we noticed something was amiss. I’ll have you know that these poor individuals

were like this when we got here. The boy being carried by one of my associates was badly injured, so I administered first aid to him, and we were just on our way to take him somewhere he could receive further medical attention. We would appreciate it if you did not treat us like hardened criminals.”

“That innocent act of yours isn’t fooling anybody, least of all us,” Dark retorted. “Miya is in our care now, and she told us all about the two of you. We’re here because we hunted you down.”

“M-Miya?!” Both Kyto and Yanaaq were blindsided by the mention of the girl they’d allowed to escape. But Kyto’s look of surprise almost instantly twisted into a self-satisfied smirk.

“This...” Kyto started. “This is absolutely perfect!” He began to chortle, which quickly turned into roaring laughter. “The very people who know exactly where that little inferior bitch ran off to have come strolling over here like blithering idiots! I must be the luckiest man alive! I really am the future legendary hero, beloved by the Goddess!”

“Legendary? Hero? I don’t think so,” Dark remarked, causing Kyto to turn his attention to this boy who had just chucked ice-cold water over his celebrations.

“You guys are simply useful chumps who are going to help us to raise our adventurer ranking,” the boy known as Dark continued. “I’ll make you cough up the evidence I’ll need in order for the guild to be satisfied that you two are indeed the serial killers they’ve been seeking, then I’ll kill you with my own two hands. You’ve murdered human beings and fatally attacked Elio’s party. There’s no way you’re leaving this place alive.”

At this juncture, the boy turned slightly to address his two associates behind him. “Of course, Gold and Nemumu aren’t going to get involved in this. Are we clear on that? Oh, though if any of these killers try to run for it, you’re allowed to stop them from escaping.”

“Right-o, milord!” the golden knight replied.

“As you command, Lord Dark,” Nemumu said.

“You...” Kyto seethed as he nursed his wounded pride. “You inferior *insect*! You *dare* to suggest that I—a proud elf and future legendary hero—won’t be

leaving here alive?! That's it! You're next to die. I'll flay you alive, stuff your skin into your mouth, then carve you up into tiny pieces, starting with your toes!"

As Kyto's blood boiled, he gripped the phantasma-class broadsword, Grandius, with both hands and held it aloft, facing down the hooded boy in front of him, who was armed with nothing but a staff and a quiet smirk.

Chapter 13: The Hunt for the Adventurer Killers, Part 3

“Yanaaq! You and the others stay back! I’m gonna be the one who kills this smartass inferior!”

The bad guy, who looked to be a rather red-faced elf—my Appraisal power told me he was “Kyto, Level 1500”—came at me with his sword swinging, not even bothering to wait for a response from his comrades.

“Die in hell, inferior!” the elf yelled.

This Kyto guy didn’t even try to feint, or bluff, or pull any other kind of swordplay trick. All he did was attempt to overpower me. I easily parried his sword with my staff, dodged his follow-up swings, and blocked every single wild blow that rained down on me after that. He channeled all of his strength into every swing, and because of that, he left himself exposed to being countered.

I eventually seized my opportunity to strike a heavy blow to his abdomen with my staff, making him dry heave. I took care to ensure the hit wasn’t strong enough to kill him instantly, but I obviously still managed to overdo it, because the elf crumpled heavily to the ground. He scrambled into a crouching position and started retching loudly, as if he were hacking up some big eggs. This would’ve been a good opportunity for me to land the finishing blow, but Kyto’s swordplay was so sloppy, I couldn’t help simply sighing with disappointment.

“All you do is angrily hack and slash with your sword, like an unthinking boar on a rampage. There’s no jockeying, no fake-outs...” I pointed out. “You don’t even *try* to read your opponent. You leave yourself so wide open, I figured it must be a trap. Was that supposed to be your strategy?”

Gold—who felt the need to add his perspective as a knight—jumped into the conversation. “You’re bang on in your analysis, milord, but I have to add that he is wholly lacking in the basics of swordsmanship. After watching this flyswatter having a go at it, I have to hand it to Elio’s party for at least *attempting* to learn

the basics of swordplay, what?”

Our main objectives were to capture these serial killers, extract the information we needed from them, execute them, then inform the guild. I didn't want to kill them *too* quickly because I wanted these murderers to suffer for what they did to Elio's party, but this elf was so weak, there was a very real possibility that I might accidentally crush him like an ant. I hadn't expected such a stark gulf in our abilities.



A whisper ending in the word “dead” interrupted the conversation. While Gold and I had been exchanging thoughts on the ongoing fight, Kyto had apparently stopped retching and started glaring at us with his fiery green pupils. Saliva oozed from his mouth, giving him the appearance of a mad dog, and he began to yell at me like a maniac.

“You’re *dead*!” he repeated. “I’m gonna kill you where you stand! Now die! Grandius!” A sound not unlike a musical chord emanated from the now-vibrating broadsword, then all of a sudden, the weapon produced floating clones of itself. Thirty of them, in fact. Kyto—who was still in a crouching position—pointed what he’d called the “Grandius” at me.

“Turn that goddamn inferior into a pincushion!”

To my surprise, the thirty blade clones came hurtling toward me like arrows. Up until this moment, I hadn’t moved an inch from the position I’d originally taken up, but the sheer number of projectiles coming at me was overwhelming.

I have a bad feeling about these things... I thought. *Maybe it’d be a good idea to play it by the book and dodge them.* And so, I finally moved from my spot in an attempt to circle Kyto and evade these clones, but they stayed firmly on my tail, intending to skewer me. *They’d be deadly enough against a normal adventurer or a monster, but I have a feeling this isn’t all these things are capable o—*

Before I could finish my thought, I instinctively swung my staff around to block a blow aimed at the back of my head. “Whoopsy!”

“Tch! You can fend off that kind of attack too?” In the chaos, Kyto had maneuvered himself around behind me by surfing one of his airborne sword clones. He had taken a flying leap toward me in an attempt to strike me from behind, but I’d sensed his presence just in time to block this surprise attack. The frustrated elf then proceeded to offer his completely wrong interpretation of my abilities.

“You look like a mage, so at first, I didn’t take you seriously, but I never would’ve pegged you as a first-rate fighter! You obviously wear that mage’s costume so your opponents will be careless around you. This is why I hate you deceitful, two-faced inferiors!”

“Huh?” I said. “I actually *am* a mage, by definition.”

“Th-Th-There’s no mage alive who can fight at my level! Don’t try and take me for a fool!” Kyto spluttered.

I honestly wasn’t playing mind games with him. I really was more of a mage than a fighter. Mei and others from my inner circle had informed me that my frontline fighting skills weren’t quite good enough for me to best a true high-level, close-combat expert, but placed at the rear of a party, the Unlimited Gacha cards allowed me to perform attack magic that would see me outclassing even the best mages. If I were to be given a label, I’d be an “Unlimited Gacha Mage,” though no such subclass existed in the real world. So technically, it was correct to call me a mage.

“Way to go, Lord Dark! Good job on using your silver tongue to make your opponent lose his cool! You’re an expert tactician!” Nemumu shouted over to me, but she’d also gotten the wrong impression of the way the fight was going, because she thought I’d *meant* to put Kyto into a full-on fit of rage. Though the end result was the same, I guess.

“Don’t you *dare* mock me!” screeched Kyto, whose face was completely red by this point, all the way to the tips of his pointy ears. He swung his broadsword and directed the blade clones at me once again, which presented me with the perfect opportunity to show him that I really was a mage.

“Ice Swords!” I activated thirty R Ice Sword cards, which manifested a cluster of large, sharply-pointed icicles that hovered around me. I aimed these Ice Swords at the Grandius clones, and made sure that each and every projectile was intercepted with deadly precision. This little trick rattled Kyto and put a stop to his incessant ranting, as if someone had kicked sand in his mouth.

“A-An *unvoiced spell*?!” Kyto finally spat out. “And you’re able to manifest *that* many Ice Swords?! Impossible. That’s completely insane! Are you telling me you really *are* a mage?! A mage who can go toe-to-toe with a warrior like me?!”

“Like I said, I am by definition a mage.” I should also add that manipulating that many Ice Swords was a high-level magical ability in and of itself. Ellie had personally taught me how to do it, and I was at the point where I was able to

manipulate up to about a hundred Ice Swords at a time, while Ellie could control over a thousand Ice Swords simultaneously without breaking a sweat. She wasn't the Forbidden Witch for nothing.

Still, Kyto's sword is quite a weapon, I thought. I didn't expect those clones to produce flames, wind, and lightning when my Ice Swords struck them.

It seemed that each of the clones produced by the Grandius contained its own magical power, without requiring any mana from the wielder. I had to admit, I was pretty impressed by this property. Kyto—who was on edge due to how badly the fight was going for him—noticed me staring at his broadsword and burst out laughing.

“How stupid of me. I still have the all-powerful Grandius!” Kyto boasted. “This is the legendary treasure of the elves! Long ago, Heaven bestowed the Grandius upon a Master! If you even tried to *touch* this baby, your body would be obliterated by the combat-class magic infused in it. After all, you can only have so much mana and physical strength to play with! Let's see how long you can dodge this sword's might!”

“Wait, did you say ‘Master’?” I asked, not even paying the slightest bit of attention to all the other things he was blathering on about. Even Gold and Nemumu gasped at the mention of the word. “Do you know what a Master is?” I said to him.

Kyto laughed maniacally at my query. “Of course I do! As a matter of fact, I'm a Master who has been chosen by the Goddess herself!” On seeing our expressions of surprise, the euphoric elf acted as if he'd gotten drunk on the world's finest wine. “Or to be more precise, I'm descended from a Master. I'm a Submaster with divine blood coursing through my veins, and I'm destined to become a legendary hero! A single drop of my blood has infinitely more value than all of you garbage inferiors put together! Now bow! Bow before me! Worship me, inferiors!”

“Submaster? So you're not a Master?” I asked. This was new information. From what I could make out from the elf's blabbering, a Submaster was someone who was descended from a Master. That would make Kyto something that was quite close to a Master, even if he wasn't actually a Master himself.

“He may not be a Master, but he’s still a valuable source of information,” I mused. “Change of plan. I won’t kill him here. We’ll kill him eventually, but we’ll take him to the Abyss first.”

Once I’d given this order, I stood ready with my staff. At first, I was just going to kill this Kyoto guy in order to raise our adventurer rank, but this development meant we weren’t going to hand his dead body over to the guild like we had planned. We needed to take Kyoto to the Abyss so we could extract all the information he had on Masters and Submasters from him. I turned my gaze toward the dark elf and the two other hooded men who stood behind Kyoto. One of the hooded men still had Elio over his shoulder.

“Nemumu. Gold. We’re taking the other three to the Abyss too. This is an order from your lord, Light: do not let them escape,” I said.

Both Nemumu and Gold unsheathed their weapons and answered in gleeful tones.

“Leave it to me, Lord Light!” Nemumu piped up.

“At your service, milord! As the Auric Knight, I, Gold, shall carry out your order to the letter, what?” the knight in gold armor declared.

“Oh gosh, how scary,” the dark elf said sarcastically. “Imagine turning your focus on little old me...” He grinned. “I, however, am a researcher, not a fighter, so if you wish to seize me by force, you will have to go through my test subjects.”

The dark elf—who, according to my Appraisal powers, was called “Yanaaq”—had a cruel smile plastered across his face, and he proceeded to raise his hands, which seemed to be some kind of signal to the two other hooded men. The one carrying Elio let the teenager fall to the ground before both men pulled back their hoods. Their appearances left me at a momentary loss for words.

The two were neither people nor recognizable monsters. If anything, they looked like total freaks of nature. One had skin resembling a bunch of rocks clumped together, as well as three human faces—one where its forehead should’ve been and one on each pec. The other monstrosity—the one that had been carrying Elio—looked like a whole load of globs of fat bunched together. This one had several human faces jutting out all over its body, making it an even

more revolting sight than the first abomination.

“I created this first test subject with the rock-like skin while still on the Dark Elf Islands,” Yanaaq explained, acting as if he were presenting a research project at a symposium. “It is the most successful experimental subject that I managed to develop during my time there. I made this creation by blending together the most unique rock lizards native to the islands. As for my second test subject, I created it using the abundant troll samples collected from this very dungeon. For both, I needed a number of inferiors to add to the mix to prevent the bodies from breaking down. One day soon, I hope to find a way to make the outward appearances of my subjects look more normal, but at this point in time, this is the best I can do.”

I had no idea why Yanaaq had fused humans with monsters, but the dark elf didn’t look even remotely guilty about the multitude of humans he’d killed for his experiments. In fact, if anything, he seemed eager to experiment on *more* humans. How exactly did Kyto and Yanaaq view us humans, anyway?

“Nemumu, Gold...” I said. “Put these long-dead test subjects out of their misery. And make sure the sick bastard who made them doesn’t get away.”

“Understood!” Nemumu and Gold yelled in unison.

“‘Sick bastard’? Me? What a terrible thing to say,” Yanaaq said. “Though I suppose an inferior child like you could never understand how truly advanced my research is.”

The way the dark elf patronized me irritated Nemumu and Gold to no end, but they prioritized carrying out my orders.

“I will end your life as Lord Light has commanded,” Nemumu said to the rock-skinned test subject. “Prepare to rest in peace.” Nemumu firmed up her grip on both of her assassin blades before rushing at the monstrosity and decapitating it with a stroke so swift, it seemed as if she’d flown past it without even touching it.

“No need to fret, what?” Gold addressed the second of the abominations. “I’ll free you from your pain in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.” And not only did Gold then cleave his bulbous, gelatinous foe in two, he did so while retrieving a still-breathing Elio and securing him under his left arm.

But despite being minus a head and having their torsos carved up, the two test subjects didn't die. They simply picked up their detached body parts and reaffixed them to make themselves whole again.

Yanaaq roared with laughter. "What a *pointless* exercise! I leveled up my subjects and enhanced their powers of regeneration! You cannot kill them simply by hacking at their necks or abdomens!"

Yanaaq cackled like a kid bragging about his new toys. And granted, this would have been a troubling development for any ordinary adventurers, but these gruesome abominations were still no match for Nemumu and Gold.

Looks like those two can handle those creatures, I thought. At that same moment, a voice as grating as fingernails across glass rang in my ear.

"Stop ignoring me like I'm an afterthought, you damn inferior!"

"Whoopsy!"

Kyto had once again swung his Grandius at me, but I nimbly sidestepped the blow, backed away from the elf, and reassumed my fighting stance, with my staff held out in front of me. I exhaled a short puff of air, then leapt forward. I may not have been an expert at close-combat, but I had undergone years of training in the Abyss with Mei as my instructor. In any case, I was a much higher level than Kyto, and the elf had again left his abdomen exposed as he lifted his sword to strike me once more. Repeating the same action as before, the blow from my staff caused him to cough up air, and he dropped to his knees in pain. I immediately followed that up with a flying kick to his face. Kyto had apparently been too focused on the pain in his abdomen to even let go of the Grandius when he flopped to the ground, and he used the sword like a cane to get back to his feet as blood streamed from his mouth and nose.

"You asth-hole! Whad've you done do me?!" he gurgled while glaring at me, his legs trembling with the effort of getting up. "I gonna gill you where you shtand, inthhherior!"

Kyto waved the Grandius like before, and once again, it emitted a musical refrain that unleashed a number of blade clones. But this time, the clones arranged themselves on the end of the Grandius itself to create a giant, five-meter-long sword.

“I never imagined I’d be forced to use my trump card against an inferior like you, but the Giant Grandius will now make mincemeat of you!” Kyto yelled at me as he charged forward wielding this colossal weapon.



The rock-skinned monstrosity with three human faces screeched a series of garbled noises as it continued to attack Nemumu.

“Quit it with that creepy noise, will you?!” Nemumu yelled at it.

The test subject had ballooned up and was now fifty percent bigger than it had been initially, standing at a good two meters tall, possibly more. Its speed, power, and tenacity all appeared to have increased too. It swung an arm at Nemumu, and only missed the assassin by a hair’s breadth, but there was enough force behind it to gouge a hole in the ground, sending dirt and rocks flying everywhere. If that mighty fist were to even graze a petite woman like Nemumu, she could be ripped to shreds. But Nemumu was more preoccupied with the fight between Light and Kyto than she was with what her own opponent was doing.

“Sh-Shoot! At this rate, Lord Light might end up winning his fight before I win mine! If I make Lord Light wait for me to finish up, I’ll never live it down for as long as I live!”

The test subject babbled incoherently in its garbled language again.

“Shut up!” Nemumu hollered before slicing off the unholy abomination’s incoming fist without even looking and delivering a flying kick to its abdomen with such force that it left a gaping hole. The test subject slammed into the ground, but got back up again without missing a beat, its fist regenerating and the hole in its abdomen filling itself in.

Gold let out a booming belly laugh. “Poor show, Nemumu, m’girl! How is that thing still giving you trouble? As a fellow servant of the Great Lord Light, you should be bloomin’ ashamed of yourself, what?”

“In that case, so should you, Gold!” Nemumu shot back, since the knight was nowhere near defeating his opponent either. But in Gold’s case, he was fighting one-handed because he had Elio on his other arm. The test subject he was

facing had been infused with troll cells, so the unnatural creature was able to regenerate any body parts that got hacked off pretty much instantly.

There was an air of assurance about Gold as he defended himself against this accusation. “I’m bally well doing double duty here, fighting this blighter while also protecting Elio! I doubt milord will blame me for my slowness in defeating this thing.”

Nemumu growled in frustration. She had considered safeguarding Elio herself at first, but the idea of touching a male who wasn’t Light didn’t sit well with her, so that job had been foisted onto Gold instead. But as a result, Gold had a fairly plausible excuse if things ended up going sideways, which would give him an advantage over Nemumu when the time came to apportion blame. Though even if she’d considered that angle, Nemumu would still have been reluctant to touch a male who wasn’t Light.

“It is hopeless, you two,” said Yanaaq. “Your powers are not sufficient to defeat my test subjects. But you have both put on such a brave display, I am willing to go easy on you when I experiment on you. As long as the two of you choose to surrender peacefully, that is.”

Yanaaq turned his licentious gaze on Nemumu. “I failed to get a good look at you while we were in the line for the dungeon that morning, but the sight of you fighting, bathed in the moonlight is indescribable! I have never even been interested in dark elf women, let alone females of another race, but your beauty has changed everything! Will you come to me, my dear? I promise to treat you lovingly until the day your beauty fades.”

“You disgust me,” Nemumu retorted sharply. “I’m only attracted to looks, and you’d have to be as handsome as Lord Light for me to even start talking to you! Which is *never* going to happen!”

Getting shot down by Nemumu so brutally caused Yanaaq’s face to freeze out of shock. Just like elves, dark elves were inordinately proud of their appearance, which probably explained why Yanaaq had such difficulty wrapping his head around the idea of Nemumu rejecting him without so much as a second thought.

Meanwhile, Nemumu’s brow furrowed as she grew increasingly frustrated at

the complete lack of progress in her battle. “I hate to use my skill against such a low-level opponent, but I can’t risk the utter fiasco of keeping Lord Light waiting. It’s time to end this now!”

“I’m with you on that, love,” Gold replied. “Let’s wrap this up, shall we?”

Nemumu and Gold reassumed their fighting stances, prompting both test subjects to rush at the two Level 5000 fighters without a hint of caution or, frankly, intelligence. Nemumu and Gold infused their blades with mana, causing them to glow with power.

“Certain Death!” Nemumu shouted.

“Judgment Flare!” Gold announced.

Nemumu beheaded the rock-skinned test subject again, while Gold sent a flaming cross slicing through the globular monstrosity. Fresh from being jilted by Nemumu, Yanaaq launched into a spittle-flecked tirade at the two warriors, thoroughly convinced of the futility of their actions.

“You foolish, foolish imbeciles! That will never work, no matter how many times you try it! My two test subjects are completely peerless! Peerless, I say! I will make you sorry you mocked me, my kitten! You will learn to be a flirtatious little devil once I’ve finished breaking you in, you damnable whore! I cannot wait to see the types of faces you make when I...”

Yanaaq didn’t make it to the end of his little victory speech. He suddenly noticed that the rock-skinned test subject was still lying dead and motionless on the ground without its head, while his other test subject—the chimera of fatty blobs—was attempting to regenerate itself but couldn’t due to the affected areas having been fried to a crisp by the golden flame from Gold’s sword. Yanaaq’s usual suaveness deserted him as his face twisted in open-mouthed, goggle-eyed shock.

“I-Impossible...” he gasped. “This can’t be! Those two subjects were the product of the maximal leveling techniques and regenerative abilities made possible by my expertise! Why are they lying dead on the ground? Getting burned alive is one thing, but why is my first test subject unable to revive itself?”

“You still don’t get it?” Nemumu said, glaring icily at Yanaaq as if he were some lowly beast. “So not only is your nature as ugly as your looks, you’re also dumber than a sack of rocks. You’re better off dead than alive!”

So how *had* Nemumu and Gold slain their opponents for good? Nemumu’s Certain Death instantly killed any target foe that was a lower level than her, which made it a particularly handy skill for an assassin to possess, though it didn’t work against opponents who were the same level as her or higher, nor was it all that useful against targets with heightened durability.

Gold’s skill, the Judgment Flare, transformed mana into what might be described as a “holy golden flame” that enveloped the sword. Any regular overpowered evil creature cut down with this golden flame would usually be completely vaporized, but because the Judgment Flare had been used against an *artificially-made* monster whose power level was well down compared to Gold’s in this instance, the flame had merely left its body as a pile of smoldering embers.

Yanaaq gulped as Nemumu approached him. When she was close enough, she delivered a swift, painful kick to the dark elf’s crotch. Yanaaq collapsed to the ground, and Nemumu placed her foot on his neck to immobilize him. On witnessing this scene, Gold’s thighs reflexively squeezed together in sympathy.

“Nemumu...” Gold said slowly. “Was that *absolutely* necessary, m’girl?”

“I won’t show any mercy to a creep who goes around killing humans and making monsters out of them,” Nemumu stated. “Besides, I don’t want to touch this dirty maggot with my hands. Hm, I’ll need to get my boots cleaned when we get back to the Abyss...”

This last sentence was more to herself than to Gold. The Auric Knight simply shrugged with an air of resignation before turning his attention to Light’s battle with Kyto.

Chapter 14: The Hunt for the Adventurer Killers, Part 4

“Drop dead!” Kyto screamed, swinging his Giant Grandius in all directions.

Even though the newly-elongated blade was over five meters in length, the weapon moved several times faster than it had before, which was probably as a result of the clones donating their powers to the Grandius. The copies also gave the giant sword the ability to lengthen and shorten at random. Whenever the weapon struck the ground, not only did it carve a ditch, the combat magic contained inside the clones also burst forth, unleashing fire, ice, wind, earth, darkness, light, and other elements. If any normal adventurer were to be on the end of one of these attacks, it wouldn't make a jot of difference how good their guard was—their body would be pulverized into unrecognizable pulp.

Isn't this weapon less like a sword now and more like some kind of magical whip? I mused. Back when I traveled with the Concord of the Tribes, we ran into an adventuring party while on the hunt for a monster, and one of their number used a whip as their weapon of choice. A quester with a whip was almost unheard of, and seeing that whip move like an entirely new species of animal had certainly been an interesting experience, but at the same time, it was no more than a gimmick. I got the same impression from the Giant Grandius as I dodged the blows aimed at me.

I put some distance between me and the elf with the colossal sword. He was sweating buckets by this time, after expending practically all of his energy swinging the oversized weapon at me. In fact, he was so worn out, his shoulders noticeably rose and fell with each breath. I sighed involuntarily at the sorry sight before me.

“You had all the confidence in the world when you first whipped out this ‘trump card’ of yours, so I was a little cautious on the off-chance it might be a real threat, but as it turns out, it was a total sideshow. It was a waste of time being so careful.”

“A... A *sideshow*?!” Kyto cried, turning beet-red with fury at this. “All you’ve done is flit around like an inferior fruit fly in the presence of my Giant Grandius, and you call it a *sideshow*?!” the elf screeched. “Goddammit, you little shit! One hit from my sword will crush you like the inferior fruit fly you are!”

I hadn’t even been trying to provoke him, yet Kyto was so furious at my assessment of the situation I was worried he might end up bursting all the blood vessels in his body. The truth of the matter was I could’ve beaten Kyto any time I wanted, but even this didn’t feel like the right time to me. After all, if I chose this moment to defeat him, Kyto would spend the rest of his days thinking he would’ve emerged victorious if only he’d managed to get a hit in with the Giant Grandius. I didn’t want to give Kyto that faint hope, however fleeting it may be. Not after what he’d done to Elio, Miya, Gimra, Wordy, and all those adventurers he slaughtered. I wanted to leave this elf without a shred of hope—the only thing he’d have left once I was through with him would be deep, dark despair.

This time, I did provoke him intentionally, by breaking out into the most innocent, angelic smile I could muster. “You believe you’ll win if you hit me just once? Okay, tell you what—I won’t move from this spot and I won’t try to block your attack. Give me all you got.”

Kyto’s emerald eyes clouded over with anguish at my words, and a look of astonishment appeared on his face. As promised, I stood rooted to the spot and signaled I wouldn’t fight back by spreading my arms out wide, and holding my staff far away from my body in my right hand.

Seeing my posture, Kyto let out a guttural roar that was hard to describe. The sound seemed to be a mixture of hurt, rage, vexation, and deep-seated resentment at being taunted by a human—a member of a race he felt nothing but bigoted contempt for. Kyto—who was totally lost in his fury by this point—didn’t even bother to consider if I was enticing him into a trap as he charged toward me with the Giant Grandius held at the ready. Once he’d gotten close enough, the elf swung his humongous sword with all the power his two hands could imbue into it.

“You’re dead! Dead! Dead! You think you’re better than me, inferior?! You dare to thumb your nose at an elf like *me*?! One strike from the Giant Grandius

will cut you down to size, inferior!” he bawled.

Despite what he said, it wasn’t just the one strike Kyto aimed at me—he slashed, stabbed, and bashed me from all directions. I got hit from the left, from the right, on the neck, on the top of the head, in the stomach... Everywhere, basically. Each time the Giant Grandius struck me, the clones showered me with combat magic consisting of fire, ice, wind, and all the other elements. Kyto didn’t hold back an ounce of his strength, and each and every direct hit was filled with the red-hot fury he harbored toward me. His attacks were so tempestuous, it was as if he wanted to strip every piece of flesh off my bones.

Yet when the onslaught had finished, Kyto found that he’d been unable to even tear my clothing or scratch my skin. In fact, his barrage of sword slashes had failed to snip a single strand of my hair. Kyto had exhausted himself to the point that his shoulders were rising and falling in time with his breathing once more, yet he hadn’t drawn a single drop of blood from me. The sight of me standing there unscathed caused the elf’s anger to give way to a look of shock, confusion, and eventually, abject misery. Breathing heavily, his perspiration turned into cold sweat.

“Why...” Kyto stammered. “How are you still alive? I struck you repeatedly with the Elven Queendom’s legendary Grandius—the *Giant* Grandius even! So why aren’t you dead?!”

“Why are you asking me that?” I retorted. “*You’re* the one who said you’d win if you could just get a hit in with the Giant Grandius. Now hurry up and kill me like you said you would.”

I took a step forward, which drew two strangled squeals of fright out of Kyto. The elf backed away from me, which only prompted me to walk toward him again.

“S-Stay away from me, you damn *freak*!” Kyto squeaked, using the last of his sapped strength to swing the Giant Grandius at me one final time. On this occasion, instead of standing still, I casually swatted the sword away with my left arm, and that single blow alone shattered all thirty blade clones that made up the Giant Grandius. The shock wave that passed down the blade from my parry was too much for Kyto to cope with, and he was forced to hurl what was

now the regular Grandius to the ground, where it buried itself tip-first. Kyto fell backwards onto his rear, and found himself scrunching up his eyes and wheezing due to the pain in his swollen hands. It appeared I had finally won our fight.

“Nemumu, go retrieve that sword,” I ordered.

“As you command, Lord Light,” Nemumu said, taking her foot off Yanaaq’s neck and strolling over to pick up the Grandius. Gold—who still had Elio under his arm—took over from her, planting an armored foot on the dark elf’s back.

Once I’d given that order to Nemumu, I ambled over to Kyto, who was still sitting on his rump on the ground. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nemumu wrapping a handkerchief around her hand before grabbing the Grandius by the hilt to pull it out of the ground. I guess the thought of touching the sword directly must have repulsed her. I hadn’t told Gold to perform this task, because for one thing, he was carrying Elio, though it was mostly because he was my designated tank, and I needed him to be free at all times in case he was required to shield me in an emergency. But would it have been better for me to order him to retrieve the sword instead?

While all of this was running through my head, I reached the seated Kyto. I kicked the elf to the ground and stomped on his neck to prevent him from fleeing, causing him to gag noisily.

“It’d be better if you don’t move a muscle,” I advised him. “If you struggle, I might accidentally end up breaking your neck.” It was more of a threat than a warning, since I didn’t want to have to deal with him trying to resist. I seemed to get through to Kyto since he did his best to remain perfectly still, even though he was still wheezing in pain. I produced the SSR Teleportation card from my front pocket.

“SSR Teleportation to the Abyss—release.”

As soon as these words had been spoken, there was a flash of bright light and all six of us disappeared from the dungeon. The next sight our eyes beheld was the training grounds on the bottom level of the Abyss. Unlike the rest of my stronghold, this section of the dungeon of doom remained undeveloped, retaining its original rock-littered terrain. Kyto—who was still pinned to the

ground with my foot on his neck—gasped in shock at the sudden change in scenery.

“Wh-Where the hell am I?!” he yelled. “What happened to the meadow we were in? The one in the dungeon?”

“We teleported back to my base, which is located at the bottom of the Abyss,” I explained. “You’ve heard of the Abyss, yeah? It’s the largest, most notorious dungeon in the world. You know it, right?”

“That can’t possibly be true!” screeched Yanaaq, who remained incapacitated under Gold’s foot, which was planted squarely in his back. “The Abyss is in the northern part of the Dragonute Empire! It’s a completely isolated backwater dungeon! You have to traverse a mountain range and a wild forest to reach it! Do you have any *idea* how far away that is from the dungeon in the Dwarf Kingdom?”

“Are you saying you don’t believe Lord Light?” Nemumu barked at him. “Do you have a death wish?”

Yanaaq shrieked at the murderous glare the assassin shot his way. But while the dark elf was highly skeptical of our claim, our attitudes were enough to convince Kyto that we really had teleported to another dungeon entirely. In fact, the abnormal event had helped the elf to connect the dots.

“W-Was it you people who gave the little human wench a magic item that allowed her to teleport?” Kyto asked.

“A magic item?” I said. “Well, I guess you could call it that, sure.” I didn’t feel like wasting time on a fuller explanation than that. I figured Kyto was going to launch into a tirade, blaming me for Miya successfully escaping his clutches, but while he did react angrily to this new information, I was way off the mark on the direction his rant would take.

“What the hell were you *thinking* just handing out a magic teleportation item to a bunch of fledgling adventurers?!” he bawled. “Do you *know* how much those things go for?!”

“Well, yeah,” I replied. “I heard you can get a pretty good price for them.”

I remembered hearing other adventurers complaining about wanting

teleportation items and being unable to acquire them back when I traveled with the Concord of the Tribes. These items were so rare, they almost never showed up in auctions, as they were seen as too valuable to part with by aristocrats and top adventurers, who would often keep such items on their person at all times as insurance in case of emergencies. The price of a teleportation item was said to be too expensive for any ordinary quester to afford.

But the SSR Wish Bracelet I gave to Miya wasn't a "teleportation" item in the strictest sense of the word. And besides, I'd become desensitized to how much an item like the Wish Bracelet fetched on the surface world, since my Unlimited Gacha had spat out a ton of that particular card. I wasn't the least bit interested in selling gacha cards on the surface though. For one thing, I could make a fortune selling the gold bullion my Gift produced if I'd wanted to, but I'd dismissed the idea of selling any of my Unlimited Gacha cards long ago, due to the remote possibility that they might end up being used against us.

At that moment, Mei appeared, her long, black ponytail swaying with every step.

"Master Light, should I prepare some tea for our guests—if that *is* how I should address them?" Mei joked dryly, in a manner befitting a professional servant. The rest of my inner circle soon followed once they noticed I'd shown up in the training grounds.

"Mrreow," purred Aoyuki, acting catlike as always.

"Welcome home, Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie chirped before icily casting an eye over the two prisoners pinned to the ground under my foot and Gold's. "I see you've brought some odd company back with you."

"Master! Welcome back to the roost!" Nazuna called out. "Ya stayin' the night in the Abyss? That means we'll be bunking up tonight, yeah?"

I couldn't help smiling at the familiar chatter from the quartet, which was rounded out by Nazuna's rather needy proposition.

"Yes, I'm back again, but I'm afraid these guys won't be needing any tea," I said. "This pair are the ones who attacked Miya and Elio's party, along with all those other humans who got murdered. On the flip side, they appear to know things about Masters, so instead of killing them outright, I decided to bring

them down here so we can extract the information out of them.”

This seemed to take my four superpowered warriors aback and their eyes all focused on my prisoners once again, their stares tinged with bloodlust this time, which drew faint shrieks out of Kyto and Yanaaq.

“So these two are the criminals who were attacking humans, are they? That means they were the ne’er-do-wells who inconvenienced Lord Light,” Mei said in an eerily dispassionate tone. “I am willing to extract the information you require and to dispose of them personally, if that is your command, Master Light. Of course, if you wish it, I will make sure to inflict so much pain on them that they will regret ever being born into this world. I swear it on my honor as a maid.”



“Blessed Lord Light, there’s no need for you to dirty your hands with these worms,” Ellie said, her beautiful smile now as chilly as ice in midwinter. “Allow me to handle their interrogation and punishment. I will make these pieces of excrement suffer through my whole catalog of forbidden spells, and no inch of their bodies—from the tops of their heads to the very tips of their toenails—will be spared.”

Aoyuki’s cat-eared hood was ominously pulled down over her eyes and she spoke bluntly with undisguised rage. “You’ve committed an unforgivable sin against Master. You must answer with unspeakable pain and your lives.”

“Hm?” Nazuna stomped forward and every step she took was accentuated by the metallic clang of the armor on her feet. “These creeps got in your way, did they, Master? I’ll make ’em pay for that by pulverizing ’em into bloody pulp!”

I was glad Nazuna was angry enough on my behalf to kill our prisoners, but we still had to extract information from them, so I airily raised my hand to stop her before she could make good on her promise. “Like I said, Nazuna, these guys seem to know something about Masters, so no executing them until *after* they’ve told us all they know, okay? That goes for everyone else too. Agreed?”

“Understood, Master Light,” said Mei.

“Mrreow!” mewed Aoyuki.

“Your word is my command, Blessed Lord Light,” said Ellie.

“If ya say I can’t slay ’em yet, then I’ll hold off on that for now, Master,” Nazuna said. “Can’t go against your orders, can I?”

I’d already given the same instructions to Gold and Nemumu, so I foresaw no problems there. We were pretty much all set to start trying to squeeze the info we wanted out of our prisoners. As for the captives themselves, Kyto—who still had my foot on his neck—and Yanaaq were trembling under the death glares of my four lieutenants. I turned my attention to the unfortunate pair.

“Now, are you ready to answer a few questions?” I asked.

“A-All right, I’ll talk!” Yanaaq cried. “I’ve heard all manner of scandal and indiscretion in my long years working in dark elf research labs. I-I *know* I’ll be

useful to you, so please don't kill me!"

"I'll talk! I'll talk too! Just spare my life!" squealed Kyto. "I'm the legendary—I mean, I'm an official member of the White Knights, the elite squad that serves at the pleasure of the Elven Queendom. In fact, I was in the running to become the next leader of the order, so I know lots and lots of stuff due to my position! The castle, key installations, where the White Knights are usually stationed—all of it! And I know plenty of other info that could be useful to you too! I'll even give you the Grandius the girl's holding, so please! Please!"

I looked down at the two adventurer killers in silence, in a way that wasn't too dissimilar to how the pair had looked down their noses at us "inferiors" in the other dungeon. After being transported to the Abyss, however, their attitudes had changed completely. This total about-face stuck in my craw, so I felt I had to ask the obvious question.

"Why aren't you fighting back?" I asked Kyto.

"Huh?" he replied blankly.

"Well, you keep bragging about how you're this 'legendary hero,' so why don't you try and fight back? You remember your last victims, those rookie human adventurers, right? Elio stood up to you to protect his little sister. Gimra and Wordy stood beside him to protect their best friend. So why aren't you—a so-called 'legendary hero'—standing up to me now?"

You might ask why Kyto's change of tune pissed me off so much. Well, it was because I now knew Miya and Elio's party—along with a multitude of human adventurers—had been needlessly and brutally assaulted and slaughtered by a self-centered, spineless suck-up. That realization had put me so on edge, I found myself loudly grinding my back teeth.

Kyto let out a little yelp. "P-Please spare me!"

I wordlessly lifted my foot off of Kyto's neck and strode over to Nemumu. "Nemumu, the sword."

"Yes, sorry," said Nemumu, who was busy wiping the hilt of the Grandius with her handkerchief, which she'd started to do as soon as she saw me approaching. Once she'd put away her handkerchief, she kneeled down and

rested the broadsword horizontally across her hands to present it to me. I took the Grandius from her and handed her my SSR Fool's Mask, before returning to Kyto—who had sat up by this point—and thrusting the sword into the ground in front of him.

I stared into Kyto's viridescent eyes, and this time, he could see my true face. "I challenge you to one last fight. If you can defeat me, I'll release the two of you without another word."

I turned away from Kyto and addressed Mei and the others. "Anyone who does anything to either of these two if he wins will have me to answer to. I'm going to fight this guy one-on-one. If he wins, you will let him and his friend return to the surface world without harming them. Are we clear?"

All of my retainers acknowledged my decree by bowing deeply, and I nodded with satisfaction. I directed my gaze down at Kyto once more. "And you couldn't really ask for a better setting to prove your mettle, could you, Mr. Future Legendary Hero? Now, use your powers to battle your way out of this life-or-death situation you find yourself in. Fight your way out of here. Come on. Take that sword and face me!"

"Th-Th-This isn't fair," Kyto whimpered, averting his gaze. "You have me surrounded..."

My inner circle immediately responded to the elf's protests.

"Master Light has declared that none of us will interfere," said Mei. "Rest assured that every single one of us will abide by his pledge."

"Even assuming someone *were* foolish enough to interfere, I would step in to protect you, so you're welcome to pick up that sword without any need to worry about us," said Ellie.

"Those who betray Master's orders are disposable," Aoyuki said coolly. "If anyone does, I will kill them myself, no matter who they are."

Despite these assurances, Kyto refused to pick up the Grandius, which prompted a desperate plea from Yanaaq.

"M-Mr. Kyto!" the dark elf called over to him. "You need to fight him and win! I-If you don't, then unimaginable horrors await us—" He was cut short by a yelp

of pain that escaped his lips. Nemumu had strode over to Yanaaq and stomped on his arm.

“Who said *you* were allowed to talk?” she spat. “I know damn well Lord Light didn’t give you permission, so I can only assume that means you’re itching to meet a fate worse than death!”

A prolonged scream erupted from Yanaaq’s mouth. “Please, stop! I’m begging you! Aieeee!”

Paying no heed to the dark elf’s pleas, Nemumu continued to grind her boot into his arm with enough force to crush bones. Gold—who still had his foot firmly planted on Yanaaq’s back—appeared visibly annoyed by the scene.

The blood-curdling screams were also making me wince. “Nemumu,” I said, a hint of censure in my tone.

“Forgive me, Lord Light,” Nemumu said. She bowed and seemed genuinely remorseful, then lifted her boot off Yanaaq’s injured arm. The ordeal had reduced the dark elf to tears, but he didn’t dare to say another word for fear of incurring the wrath of my warriors once more.

Seeing his partner in such a pitiful state drained the color from Kyto’s face. “I-I’ll talk! I said I’ll talk, okay?! I’ll tell you everything I know! If that information isn’t enough, I’ll even personally guide you through the Elven Queendom, so please—”

“My Master toldja to fight, so pick up the sword and hop to it already, yeah?” Nazuna interrupted him. “Don’t tell me you’re too chicken, ya big wuss!”

Kyto snapped at Nazuna’s provocations. “So what if I’m afraid? He’s a freak of nature who just wouldn’t die no matter how many times I hit him with my ultimate weapon, the Giant Grandius! And now the rest of you have come out of the woodwork to threaten me as well! I have every *right* to be scared! And besides, I’m 200 years old! How old are you girls? Don’t you humans know you should respect your elders?!”

Kyto ended up playing the last card his desperate mind thought might be to his advantage: his age. The sight was so profoundly pathetic, it made me sigh.

“This has nothing to do with age,” I retorted. “Do you know how irrelevant

that is? First off, who even decided that you always have to show respect to anyone who's older than you? How are we supposed to respect someone who went around slaughtering a whole bunch of people? Do you think just being older allows you to get away with *everything*? So if someone older than you tried to murder you, you'd immediately offer up your neck for them to slash?"

Kyto choked up, unable to present any sort of counterargument to this, though the elf wasn't quite ready to give up on his appeal to save his skin.

"You can keep the Grandius! It's a phantasma-class weapon!" he said. "I've already said I'll tell you everything I know! Come on, cut me some slack here! Let me cooperate! I'm offering you a national treasure of the Elven Queendom!"

"A phantasma-class weapon?" I replied. "I've already got a bunch of those. So many, in fact, I'm running out of space for them. Take a look."

I produced a series of weapons from my Item Box and lined them up with their tips buried into the ground in front of Kyto. They included regular swords, long swords, short swords, lances, halberds, and hand axes. Some of the blades were so sharp and deadly, one could easily mistake them for weapons belonging to an entirely different class. Kyto jolted at this display of weaponry, his eyes wide as saucers. To finish proving my point, I thrust my staff toward the stunned elf and dropped another bit of info that hit him like a thunderbolt.

"For your information, this staff is called the God Requiem Gungnir. It's a genesis-class weapon."

"A-Are you crazy? That's insane!" Kyto screeched. "We can't even say for sure if *mythical-class* weapons exist! A genesis-class weapon would be something an actual god would've wielded back at the beginning of time! A weapon like that just isn't supposed to exist anywhere in this world!"

Even Yanaaq stopped silently writhing in agony and gawked at my staff, as if his pain had been completely forgotten momentarily. In spite of Kyto's protestations, everything I'd told him was true. I was holding an EX God Requiem Gungnir in my hands—the sole EX card my Unlimited Gacha had produced in the past three years. It looked plain enough as staffs go, but its true form was a spear. Its current appearance was the result of multiple magical

seals being placed on it that served to minimize its powers.

The only people who knew about the Gungnir's true capabilities were me, Mei, Ellie, and Aoyuki. Or more accurately, we knew all the fragments of information our Appraisal powers had gleaned. A bunch of words had been blotted out on the readouts, so even we only knew some of what it could do. For example, one passage read "A spear____a_____god." That aspect added a bit of menace to the Gungnir, and the fact it could block Level 9999 appraisers from reading its full description only served to amplify its threat. So the four of us had decided not to tell anyone else about the enigmatic powers of the Gungnir, and we'd forbidden anyone else from using Appraisal on the staff.

Because of the multiple seals on it, the staff wasn't anywhere near as powerful as advertised, but it was highly durable and I personally found it pretty handy, so it had become my weapon of choice. The staff also had the power to return to its owner if they strayed too far from it, which should prevent it from ever being stolen.

"No way, no way, no way, no way!" Kyto babbled. "How can an inferior like you have a genesis-class weapon?! That would mean an inferior is some kind of *god*!" Kyto paused. "I get it. I'm dreaming. This is all a dream. My Grandius is still the greatest sword in the world! It *has* to be!"

Everything that had happened since Kyto had encountered me in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon had shattered the elf's entire worldview. A mage had bested him in battle, even though he was a Level 1500 close-combat specialist. He'd gotten in several clean hits on me with the Giant Grandius, yet he hadn't left a single scratch on me. And last but not least, I'd transported him to a faraway dungeon in a matter of seconds, where he'd found himself surrounded by Mei and a number of other superpowered warriors who all had the ability to instantly beat him in combat as well. Due to all of this, he knew in the back of his mind that I really was holding a genesis-class weapon. But he didn't want to accept this new reality outright, so he kept on telling himself it was all a dream.

If you're wondering why Kyto was unable to hurt me with the Giant Grandius, there were a few reasons. First of all, Kyto was a much lower level than me. Another reason was that a low-to-mid-tier phantasma-class weapon wasn't going to inflict any damage on a Level 9999 individual like me, especially as I

was equipped with top-end protective gear. The only way he could've harmed me is if he'd hit me with a top-tier phantasma-class weapon or a mythical-class weapon.

I interrupted Kyto's rather confused train of thought. "From what I heard, Miya's brother, Elio, and her friends, Gimra and Wordy, fought you even though they were in a situation as hopeless as the one you are in now. So if you *are* the future legendary hero you say you are, you'd most definitely pick up that sword and fight me, right?" At this point, I repeated my challenge to the green-eyed elf. "I'll say it again: this is your chance to prove yourself, Mr. Future Legendary Hero. Use your powers to fight your way out of this life-or-death situation. Beat me and escape with your life. Grab that sword and stand up to me."

Nemumu continued where I left off. "Like Lord Light said, if you really *are* a future legendary hero, you will have to face these kinds of adversities on countless occasions, so get up and fight."

"If you are who you bally well say you are, then it's about time you grabbed that little meat carver of yours, what?" Gold chimed in. "Now, get up off your backside and get on with it, m'laddo."

My four lieutenants followed up with their own attempts at provocation.

"You will stand up and fight," said Mei.

"Get up and fight him already," said Ellie.

"Stand up. Fight," said Aoyuki.

"C'mon, quit stallin' and fight!" said Nazuna.

I noticed the fairy maids had also started to file into the training grounds, probably to see what all the commotion was about. Once they caught sight of Kyto sitting in front of the Grandius, they pointed at the elf and started giggling and jeering as well.

"Get up!" shouted one.

"Come on. Aren't you gonna fight?" another called over.

"Hurry it up. Fight like a man!"

"You mustn't keep our Master waiting, so stand up and fight already."

“Get up!”

“Fight!”

“Stand!”

“Geddup, geddup, geddup, geddup, geddup, geddup, get up!”

All this badgering eventually made Kyto scream at length and take off at full tilt toward an exit that wasn’t blocked by a fairy maid. But I was prepared.

“SSR Solar Ray—release!”

A lightning-fast beam of light shot through Kyto’s leg, making him shriek in pain and causing him to tumble clumsily to the rock-filled floor of the training grounds. The Solar Ray had left a hole in his leg large enough to see through, but the beam had also cauterized the flesh, so no blood seeped out of the wound.

“Who said you could run away?” I barked at the elf. “I told you to stand and face me, Mr. Legendary Hero.”

“S-Stay away! Stay back! Don’t come near me!” Kyto cried. “I’m the future legendary hero chosen by the Goddess herself! I’m not destined to die in a dark and dingy place like thi—”

I cut Kyto’s rant short by plunging the Grandius into the ground in front of him again, this time missing his family jewels by a matter of millimeters. I did however manage to slice off a few strands from his forelock, which floated gently to the floor.

“Fight me, Legendary Hero!” I commanded, but it fell on deaf ears. Instead of getting to his feet, Kyto fainted backwards, probably due to his close shave. The back of his head struck the floor hard, but he didn’t seem to react to the blow. He just lay on the ground unconscious with his eyes rolled back and foam forming at the corners of his mouth. I looked down at Kyto with an expression of utter indignation on my face after witnessing this anticlimactic farce.

“Miya was right,” I finally spat out, my words dripping with contempt for the elf. “You’re not legendary or a hero. You’re just a loser running away from reality.”

After treating him to one last glare, I spun on my heels and strode back to my inner circle. “He’s a despicable bastard, but even so, he’s a valuable source of intelligence. Do whatever it takes to extract every last bit of information out of him, and once you’re done, execute him.”

“As you wish, Master Light. On my honor as a maid, I shall carry out your order,” Mei said, before underlining her statement with a picture-perfect bow.

Yanaaq—who had remained totally silent out of fear of receiving another painful rebuke—raised his voice in a last-ditch attempt to save his life. “Wait...” he stammered. “Wait a minute! I did that research because Kyto threatened me! I’m one of his victims too! So I’m begging you, please don’t kill me! Don’t kill me! Don’t kill meee!”

I slowly turned to face the dark elf, who sounded like a devout worshiper wailing a fervent prayer to his god. “What did you do when the humans you used as lab animals said the same thing to you?” I asked Yanaaq.

“Eek!” he yelped. “I... Well, I...”

“Then that’s the same answer you’ll get from me. This guy might know something that’ll be of some use to us too. Give him the same treatment as Kyto. Do whatever you have to do to extract what he knows. Once you’re done, make him suffer so much, he regrets ever being born. And then, you can put him out of his misery.”

“No... No!” Yanaaq yelled. “Spare me, please! I’m beg—”

Nemumu brought his screeching to an abrupt end by knocking him unconscious. I was thankful to her for that, because he’d sounded like a stuck pig. I was finally free to retire to my room in silence after all the awful events I’d had to deal with tonight. If I didn’t relax and decompress, it was doubtful I’d ever return to the surface world.

Chapter 15: The Hunt for the Adventurer Killers, Final Part

“B-Brother?” Miya murmured sleepily, then all of a sudden, she was wide awake and sitting bolt upright. She was in the top-floor suite my party had taken at the inn in the Dwarf Kingdom, though she didn’t know that yet. I was sitting in a chair by her bedside, watching over her.

“Good morning, Miya,” I said to her.

“Huh? Where am I?” Miya looked all around her, in much the same way a timid little animal would on finding itself in unfamiliar surroundings. I waited until she’d calmed down to a reasonable degree before I explained to her how she’d ended up here.

“Last night, Gold heard the news about those quester killers while drinking down at the guild,” I began. I went on to tell her that, on hearing this news, my party had gone off in search of these adventurer killers so we could give our reputation a boost. We were looking high and low for them in the dungeon late into the night when we just happened to see a young elf about to slay Miya. We arrived in the nick of time and launched a surprise attack, but as soon as the elf saw us, he decided to flee to the deepest part of the dungeon, taking his accomplice—a dark elf who was just as youthful-looking—with him.

We hadn’t pursued the pair, I explained, because we weren’t sure how powerful they were. Instead, we safeguarded Miya—I told her she’d passed out by that point, which is why she didn’t remember—and searched the surrounding area. We eventually came across her brother, Elio, and Gimra and Wordy. Elio was clinging to life by a thread, but sadly, the other two were already dead by the time we showed up.

Based on this circumstantial evidence, we determined that the elf and the dark elf were the serial killers we’d been looking for. Once we’d applied some stopgap healing magic to Elio’s wounds, we ferried the two siblings out of the dungeon, partly to make sure they were safe, and partly so we could go tell the

authorities about the incident. We'd brought Miya back to our suite at the inn and taken Elio to a clinic, so that he could receive proper treatment for his very serious injuries. Gold was assigned the job of relaying the information about the adventurer killers to the guild.

Of course, I'd completely fabricated this version of events. I'd had to come up with a cover story that wouldn't raise any suspicion from Miya or the guild. The guild would be easy enough to fool, and Miya's memories from before and after she went to sleep were very hazy thanks to the SR Slumber card, so I was certain she'd have absolutely no recollection of her short stay in the Abyss.

Kyto and Yanaaq—the elf and dark elf I'd left unnamed in my cover story—remained incarcerated in the Abyss while my people interrogated them. I'd ordered any and all information regarding Masters and Submasters to be extracted from them, no matter how coercive the techniques were that they needed to use. Right at this minute, Ellie and her team were likely using forbidden sorcery to wring out their memories and record every detail—a process that would most certainly involve excruciating pain.

I continued feeding Miya my prepared story, taking care not to betray any hint of equivocation. At least the Fool's Mask helped to hide my facial expressions. "After hearing our evidence, the guild also determined that it was highly likely that young elf and dark elf were the adventurer killers. They said they wanted to hear your full testimony as soon as you were awake, Miya."

"O-Okay, sure," Miya replied. "Those two were definitely the adventurer killers. They suddenly showed up out of nowhere right behind us, and when we told them about the killings, they said they should've done more to hide the evidence. Then one of them attacked my brother and our friends, and..."

Miya—who was still sitting up in bed—gripped the blanket tightly in her tiny hands. I took two folded handkerchiefs from my front pocket and gave them to her.

"What are these?" Miya asked.

"Locks of hair. Gimra's and Wordy's," I answered. "I'm sorry. We were able to save Elio, but the other two..." I trailed off. "We had to leave their bodies behind in the dungeon."

Miya reacted with surprise. “Th-Thank you! I’m so glad I at least have locks of their hair to remember them by! Thank you...” she murmured. “Thank you...” The finality of her friends’ deaths had hit her by this point, and she hugged the handkerchiefs to her chest as the tears began to fall.

We were able to save Elio, but it was simply too late for Gimra and Wordy, I thought. Yanaaq had actually been the one who had applied the healing magic to Elio, because in his words, he needed him as a lab animal. If we’d arrived on the scene any later, Elio would have been killed in some monstrous lab experiment. There *was* a spell that could resurrect the dead, but it wasn’t foolproof and you had to jump through a whole bunch of hoops to make it work. We hadn’t been able to fulfill those conditions for Gimra and Wordy. A human only had one life, and it wasn’t an easy task restoring it, no matter how powerful you were.

I think this is all I can do here for today, I decided, then left the suite without saying another word. But even after I’d closed the door behind me, my heightened sense of hearing still picked up Miya’s sobs. *I worked hard to get to my current power level so that I could take revenge on those who wronged me, but having heightened hearing can be a bit of an issue in times like this.*

I put some distance between myself and the door, giving Miya some time alone so she could cry herself out.



The outcome of the serial killer case resulted in two things changing. The first one was, in exchange for the information regarding the criminals, the guild bumped my party up a notch to C-rank. After Miya had cried all the tears she could cry over the deaths of Gimra and Wordy, she went down to the guild later that same day to give her detailed testimony of events. The guild corroborated Miya’s statement with the information my party had submitted and concluded without a shadow of a doubt that the young elf and dark elf were the serial killers. The guild also drew up some composite sketches of the culprits based on the descriptions provided by Miya and my party, so that others would know who to look out for. A vigilante party was formed and a manhunt was launched to capture these murderers, who—according to my party’s fictitious testimony—had fled to the deepest part of the dungeon. At first, I’d assumed we’d need

to bring back the bodies of these serial killers before the guild would raise my party's rank, but it turned out just providing info on them was all it had taken to get us up to C-rank, which officially made us full-fledged professional adventurers. It was an unexpected stroke of luck for us.

The second thing that changed because of this quester killer case was Elio and Miya decided to give up on being adventurers, which in essence meant turning their backs on their hopes of sending Miya to the elite magic school in the Duchy and returning to a normal life back where they grew up. As soon as Elio was released from the clinic, he and Miya chucked out most of their belongings that were in their room at the inn they'd been staying at. They planned to leave the city the following day, serving as bodyguards for a caravan of traders until they reached their hometown.

Before they left town, Elio and Miya stopped by the inn my party was staying at to say a final goodbye. We brought them up to one of our suites and sat them down on a sofa in the lounge area. Nemumu placed tea in front of them on a little table, while I reclined on another sofa across from the two of them. Gold and Nemumu watched on from the corner of the room. Miya and Elio broke the ice by bowing their heads.

"You've done so much for us in the short time we've known each other. You even saved my brother's life," said Miya. "We really can't thank you enough."

"Thank you so much for rescuing me," said Elio. "If it hadn't been for your party, Dark, I wouldn't be sitting here today."

"Please," I said modestly. "You guys furnished me with good advice and gave me that burn salve as a gift. It was only pure coincidence that I was able to help you in return."

I couldn't tell them it had been the SSR Wish Bracelet of all things that had saved Miya's life and set off the sequence of events that had led us to her brother. Besides, I didn't feel all that worthy of their thanks because I hadn't been able to save Gimra and Wordy—though I didn't really want to spoil the moment by bringing up their deaths. In truth, it hadn't even been me who'd saved Elio. He'd just been incredibly lucky. I simply hadn't been powerful enough to do what had to be done to prevent a tragedy.

I decided to change the subject. “So I know you two said you were quitting being adventurers and returning to your hometown, but you’re a hardworking quester, Elio, and Miya’s a talented mage. I imagine there’d be plenty of adventurers who’d love to have both of you in their parties.”

“Yes, we’ve received offers from several people,” Miya said. “But after what happened to us, I’m just too scared to go questing in a dungeon again.” She clasped her hands together tightly in her lap, but couldn’t stop them from shaking. It was only natural, given how her brother had been severely wounded and their two friends hacked to death in front of her eyes.

“Oh, and there’s another reason too,” Miya added sheepishly. “We only became adventurers in the first place because our best friends teamed up with us. We can’t even imagine carrying on as adventurers without them. Right, brother?”

“Yeah,” said Elio. “It’d be too weird forming a party with other people, especially now. We also want to take those locks of Gimra’s and Wordy’s hair back to our hometown. We’ll make a new life for ourselves there, with the help of our relatives.”

“Okay, I see...” I replied, trailing off into an uncomfortable silence.

Miya attempted to brighten the mood by adding a little cheer to our conversation. “Getting into the Duchy’s magic school might have gotten a lot harder now, but I’ll carry on grinding away with my brother. I’ll study magic on my own and become a mage you and your party can be proud of. If you ever stop by our village, come and say hi to us.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” I said.

“Thanks. We’ll be waiting for you,” said Miya. “Our entire village will give you a very warm welcome.”

“That’s a promise, Dark,” said Elio, who—like his sister—was smiling broadly. “We’ll be watching for you.”

The two siblings made time to chat to Gold and Nemumu before they went, but they eventually said one final goodbye and departed, leaving just me and the team in the suite.

“I’m heading back to the Abyss,” I declared. “If anyone else comes to see me, tell them to come back later.”

“As you wish, Lord Light,” said Nemumu. I activated the SSR Teleportation card and left Nemumu and Gold to hold the fort here.



On arriving in my dungeon stronghold, I made my way to my office. I’d told Mei and Ellie in advance that I’d return to the Abyss after saying my goodbyes to Miya and Elio in order to get a progress report on the interrogation of Kyto and Yanaaq, which is why my two deputies were already in the office waiting for me. They bowed their heads as I entered the room.

“I thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to see us, Master Light,” Mei said. “It is my absolute honor as a maid to have this audience with you.”

“I’ve also been eagerly waiting to see you, Blessed Lord Light!” said Ellie. “I feel like I want to celebrate this day every year from now on!”

I hadn’t seen Mei and Ellie in days, so the two of them were ridiculously thrilled to see me. I laughed sheepishly as I removed my mask and placed it on the desk before sitting down in the chair there and getting down to the business of our captives.

“You two are a sight for sore eyes too,” I replied. “Anyway, how’s everything going with Kyto and Yanaaq?”

“It’s all going splendidly, naturally!” Ellie said gleefully, strutting toward me with her rather shapely chest thrust out proudly. “I was able to use my forbidden magic to dig around in all the dark corners of their skulls and I retrieved memories even they had long forgotten!”

“I also conducted verbal interrogations with the aid of my lie-detection magic,” Mei added. “We wanted to ensure there were no inconsistencies with the memories Ellie extracted. Here is our report.”

The meticulous document dropped out of Mei’s finely-shaped fingers onto my desk. I’d assumed I was going to get an interim progress report, but it looked like they had more or less finished extracting all the information the two

prisoners had to offer, and in a shorter time frame than I'd expected. I thanked them both and started reading the report. Not only was the handwriting very neat and legible, it was written in a way that was easy to understand.

Midway through my read through, I hit upon one section that made my brow furrow deeply. "Are you sure this is right?"

"Of course," said Mei. "The information contained in this report has been verified by Ellie's forbidden magic and my lie-detection skills."

"My magic is worthless compared to *your* Unlimited Gacha cards, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie cooed. "But for what it's worth, I believe this report is essentially airtight, for the reasons she laid out."

Mei and Ellie were my brain trust, and I'd left the two of them in charge of governing the Abyss and working on our strategy respectively for that very reason. If they both said the document was indisputable, I had no choice to believe them. Even so...



“So in short, a ‘Submaster’ is a descendant of a Master, and because of that, he or she is gifted with increased strength and heightened magical abilities, and has the potential of reaching a high power level,” I said. “There’s nothing in that part that I hadn’t already anticipated.”

Masters appeared to be sought after by all the nations of the world, so it would beggar belief if a Submaster ended up being just a regular person. That went some way to explaining why Kyto—the self-styled “legendary hero”—was of the belief that he was never meant to hit his growth limit at Level 1500, and went as far as absconding from his homeland and slaughtering a load of people in an attempt to resolve this problem.

“But it says here that nations are wary of Masters because they can ‘potentially destroy the world if they’re allowed to roam free,’” I read out from the report. “I don’t get it. I’d understand if they were worried about them destroying a nation, but the entire world?”

It wasn’t that I doubted Mei and Ellie—I just found the idea *itself* too far-fetched. We’d thought nations were seeking out Masters to recruit them and gain access to their incredible abilities for the purposes of maintaining the balance of power with rival nations. The idea that Masters could end up destroying the world if left unchecked was a somewhat unexpected one. I would’ve found it more logical if the concern had been that a Master could potentially overthrow the established order and declare themselves ruler, but why would a Master destroy the world, thereby eradicating every last person of every race? Of course, the possibility existed that this was just an exaggeration.

In Yanaaq’s case, he *much* preferred researching in his laboratory over experiencing all the things the real world had to offer, so we weren’t able to glean all that much in the way of useful information out of him. One thing that did catch my interest, however, was the different views elves and dark elves held about Masters.

According to the report, elves actively sought to appropriate the blood of Masters, so their race would gain the power to oppose other nations. But dark elves rejected Masters, instead choosing to build up their offensive capabilities off the back of their own strengths. Elves and dark elves saw each other as

rivals, and it seemed their differences even extended to their views on Masters.

On learning all this, I couldn't help airing my thoughts. "A Master is just one person, no matter how strong he or she is. Could one individual seriously destroy the whole world, and in so doing, kill all life on it? It *might* be a different story if you got enough Level 9999 people like me together, but even then..."

At the end of the day, I was still the second son of a peasant farmer, and I was having a great deal of trouble wrapping my head around this difficult concept, so I turned to my advisors for help. "Mei, Ellie, what do you make of this bit of info?"

"The idea that a Master may destroy the world if allowed free rein was one of Kyto's forgotten memories that Ellie managed to retrieve with her forbidden magic," Mei stated. "It was once uttered by the commander of the White Knights, the Elven Queendom's most elite squad. We lack any additional information regarding that anecdote, so I cannot make a judgment on it."

"I hate to admit it, but I have to agree with Mei regarding the present lack of information," Ellie said. "That little nugget of info made me curious enough to dig through all their memories again, covering every square inch of their brain matter, but I couldn't find anything else of value."

If Ellie couldn't dig up anything else despite repeatedly scouring their brains using magic, that meant we'd gotten every last bit of information they had to offer. I placed Mei's document on the desk and leaned back in my chair.

"Where are Kyto and Yanaaq now?" I asked.

"In the underground cells, as you can see," said Ellie, who snapped her fingers and showed me the two captives on some sort of floating vision. They were both slumped on the cold floor, still alive and conscious, but after repeated harrowing sessions of forbidden sorcery, where their minds were picked apart before they were revived again with healing magic, their eyes were totally blank and both were faintly muttering to themselves.

I nodded curtly on seeing this, then gave Ellie and Mei their new orders. "Since we now know everything they know, we don't need anything else from them..." I stated. "And I won't deviate from what I said before. These two must pay the ultimate price for attacking Elio and Miya, killing Gimra and Wordy, and

murdering an untold number of people in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon. For the heinous crime of slaughtering a multitude of innocent humans, I command you to end their lives this instant.”

“Upon my honor as a maid, it shall be done,” said Mei.

“Your wish is my command, Blessed Lord!” said Ellie.

Kyto and Yanaaq were despicable creatures, but we’d managed to get some useful information out of them. I felt they’d suffered enough, and we didn’t need them anymore. Ellie snapped her fingers a second time, and the floating vision slowly faded away as Kyto and Yanaaq had their lives snuffed out.

“Now, there’s other information contained in this report that I’ll have to examine closely,” I said. For one, we’d also extracted intelligence regarding the inner workings of the Elven Queendom. But before I could get back to reading, Ellie stepped forward, smiling from ear-to-ear and looking like a doting older sister who’s regarding her little brother.

“Blessed Lord Light, if it’s ‘other information’ you want, I have some welcome news that you simply must hear!”

“News?” I asked. “In that case, lay it on me.”

“Of course!” Ellie said happily. “I’ve finally completed the preparations on the revenge plan against Sasha you kindly assigned to me!”

“Huh? Do you mean it, Ellie?” I asked.

“Indeed! Just give the word and I’ll immediately put the plan into motion!” she said. “Furthermore, that elf who betrayed you is now betrothed to the vice-commander of the White Knights, the order Kyto belonged to. Since the White Knights are filled with Submasters, I’ll go ahead and capture them while I’m carrying out this revenge plot.”

“Ah, that’s perfect, Ellie!” I exclaimed. “What a great idea! In that case, put this plan into action at once!”

“As you wish, Blessed Lord Light!” Ellie replied.

Hearing the revenge plot against Sasha had finally taken shape lifted my spirits immensely, completely banishing the mood I’d been in a few short

moments before. After I'd given Ellie her orders, she bowed gracefully to me, holding her hat with her hand to stop it from falling off, while her other hand gripped the hem of her asymmetrically-parted bicolored skirt. Though the elegance of the gesture was somewhat spoiled by the fact that she was visibly shaking with euphoria at receiving my command, as if a god had just imparted his blessing upon her soul.

I laughed sheepishly at Ellie's reaction, then allowed a deeply satisfied smile to spread across my face. With Kyto and Yanaaq taken care of, I was free to turn my thoughts to the next leg of my revenge odyssey.

"So after Garou, I get to exact my vengeance on Sasha next, huh?" I sneered. "Ah, I can almost see the hopeless look on her face as she's writhing about in pain, begging for me to spare her life. I can't wait for that moment to come."

Extra Story: A Day in the Life of Nazuna

Her red eyes gleaming and her long silver hair swaying with every step, the SUR Ancestral Vampire Knight, Nazuna, was making her rounds in the bottom level of the Abyss. Even though she was short in stature, her breasts were voluptuously huge and she had the appearance of a sheltered heiress. But when she spoke, it was clear she was a beautiful girl who was full of life and gusto.

“Gotta do what Master ordered and make sure the Abyss is safe while he’s out on his mission,” Nazuna told herself.

The truth was, while the Vampire Knight was indeed the strongest fighter in the Abyss when it came to close combat, the main reason Light hadn’t taken her with him up to the surface world on his Operation Adventurer mission was because, unfortunately, she wasn’t smart enough to be able to adapt when the situation called for it. Light also felt he couldn’t comfortably entrust her with managing the Abyss while he was away because she lacked the aptitude for the task.

That wasn’t to attack her unnecessarily. Everyone in the Abyss would agree she had a sunny personality that made her the life of the dungeon, and due to that aspect alone, she was an invaluable member of the team. But everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. So before Light left, he had instructed Nazuna to “protect” the dungeon in his absence, and she had readily agreed. On this particular day, she was in the middle of carrying out her daily patrol around the Abyss for the “Master” she loved—as she put it—“so super-duper much.”

Nazuna’s route happened to take her past a group of fairy maids who were busy doing some cleaning, and a couple of them called over to her.

“Miss Nazuna, good day to you!”

“Miss Nazuna, are you taking your daily walk—I mean, are you patrolling right now?”

Nazuna pridefully stuck out her ample chest. “Yep, you betcha! I’m out and

about, keepin' the Abyss safe. Master gave me a *real* big assignment, y'know!"

The maids proceeded to shower Nazuna with praise, even though they all knew the real purpose of Light's "assignment" that he had given her.

"You're amazing, Miss Nazuna!"

"Now we can do our cleaning in peace, knowing that you're here to protect us, Miss Nazuna."

"You're lit, Naz!"

Nazuna giggled. "Aw, stop, you're embarrassin' me. I'm only doing what Master told me, that's all." Nazuna tried to come across as modest, but she couldn't stop her mouth from curling upwards into a grin. All this adulation made Nazuna believe she was a key contributor to Light's plans, when in reality, the Level 500 maids were using flattery to manipulate the Level 9999 Nazuna.

"So where will you be going next on your patrol?" asked one of the maids.

"Uh, I haven't really decided that yet," Nazuna replied. "Why d'ya ask?"

"Well, you see, the thing is..." said a second maid. "We'd really like you to make a stop at this one place..."

"But it's like super-secret or something? So us maids aren't allowed near it?" said the third maid, who had a habit of turning everything into a question.

"Really? That's news to me," said Nazuna. "But sure, I can do that. What kinda place are we talkin' about?"

The fairy maids shared a secret smile with each other. "Here's where you need to go..." one of the maids began.

Nazuna was shortly sent on her way, humming as she skipped off to her next port of call.



Nazuna knocked on the door of the room the fairy maids had given her directions to. After a fairly lengthy wait, Mei opened the door.

"Oh, it is you, Nazuna?" said Mei, her black ponytail swaying. "Whatever brings you to Light's private chambers?"

“Just here on patrol!” Nazuna said, a bright smile plastered across her face. This candid yet puerile answer caused Mei to put her fingers to her temples, as if she was attempting to suppress a headache. But Nazuna wasn’t done.

“Mei, what’re ya doin’ in Master’s room anyway?” Nazuna asked with a completely innocent look on her face. “I thought he was s’posed to be off questin’ up on the surface.”

After an uncomfortable pause, Mei said, “Although Master Light is absent at this present time, failing to clean his room would be contrary to my code as a maid. I was merely making sure everything was in its right place in here when you knocked, so there is no need for you to enter at this time.”

“Ohhh, gotcha! Good thinkin’, Mei!” said Nazuna, who seemed totally convinced by this answer. She did have one more question though. “But I thought I sensed ya rollin’ around in Master’s bed and sniffin’ his pillow while ya were kickin’ your feet. Won’t that just wrinkle his sheets and stuff?”

This caused Mei to firmly press her fingers against her temples once more. Nazuna was a Level 9999 fighter—the strongest in the Abyss, in fact—which meant, regardless of how thoroughly Mei had tried to magically conceal her actions, she was never going to be able to prevent the Vampire Knight from sensing what she’d been up to. But Mei soon composed herself again, and looking as poker-faced as it was possible to be, came out with her excuse for her questionable conduct.

“That is nothing for you to be concerned with. I was merely using a new bed-making technique I have developed myself. It is a highly *secret* method, so I am afraid I cannot elaborate further.”

“Wow, a secret housekeepin’ technique!” Nazuna said, nodding vigorously. “No wonder Master summoned ya first! I never knew housekeepin’ came with its own power moves!”

Mei once again had her fingers pressed to her temples, which prompted a worried look from Nazuna. “What gives, Mei? Ya got a headache or something?”

“No, I am fine,” said Mei. “However, I do wish you would make better use of your mental faculties. Or at least take a little more time to think before you

act.”

“Not sure I getcha, but ya better go rest up if ya got a headache,” Nazuna suggested. “Oh yeah, some fairy maids told me to stop by this room to give ya a message.”

“Oh?” Mei said, her eyes narrowing. “And what message might that be?”

Nazuna, in all her obliviousness, blithely repeated what the fairy maids had told her to say. “Lessee, they said: ‘Stop hogging Master’s room all to yourself!’ ‘We have a right to clean Master’s room too!’ ‘I’m against the head maid’s monopolization of his room,’ ‘Hope you get cursed!’ and ‘Curse you! Curse you! Curse you!’ I guess they said the first ones ’cause they didn’t want’cha overworkin’ yourself, but I don’t get the last bit about curses. Maybe they want’cha to build up resistance to magical curses?”

There was a short pause before Mei finally mustered a response. “This would appear to be an issue between me in my capacity as the head housekeeper and the fairy maids, so there is no need for you to trouble yourself with the specifics. However, I would greatly appreciate it if you could tell me the names of these fairy maids who gave you those messages, so that I can address their concerns personally.”

“Ya got it! Lessee...” Nazuna faithfully divulged the names of the fairy maids who’d sent her to Light’s private chambers on false pretenses. Once this information had been imparted to her, Mei activated her Item Box and retrieved some money from it.

“I thank you for your help. It is not much, but here is a reward for relaying these messages to me. When you take a break from your patrolling, you can use it to purchase some snacks.” Translation: I’ve heard enough out of you now, so leave me alone.

“Thanks, Mei! You’re so nice!” Nazuna said gratefully, taking the pocket money from her without catching the hint. “If ya ever need any help, ya can always come to me. I got your back!”

Mei watched Nazuna amble away from Light’s private chambers until she was safely out of sight, then at the first opportunity, the head maid quickly left to “address the concerns” of the fairy maids who had hoodwinked Nazuna into

doing their dirty work for them.

Nazuna's next stop on her patrol was the shop, where she used the money Mei had given her to buy some snacks. The shop sold a wide variety of food and other items that had been produced by Normal cards the Unlimited Gacha had spat out, which was ideal because if it wasn't for this store, all the Normal cards would never be used and would just be taking up space. The currency used to purchase these goods was unique to the Abyss; the people responsible for creating all the counterfeit money had run out of stuff to do for the time being, so they'd been given the job of creating this new currency.

Nazuna's snack food of choice was the red bean pancake. She'd tried a lot of the other snacks on offer, like the chocolate, the cookies, and the salty-and-sweet confections, but the red bean pancake—which looked like a pancake sandwich with a dollop of sweet azuki bean paste in the middle—were the most satisfying to her taste buds. Nazuna bought a carton of milk with it, then took her purchases to the cafeteria. Once she was done eating, she headed off to patrol the training grounds, but before she could make it there, she ran into Aoyuki in the corridor.

"Hey, Aoyuki. What'cha doin' hangin' out around here?" Nazuna asked her.

"Rrrow." Aoyuki's low-pitched mewing and stern facial expression suggested she was rather annoyed that she'd run into Nazuna—though of course, the latter didn't pick up on this and continued prattling away as normal.

"Weren't ya s'posed to be patrollin' the forest circlin' the Abyss? Wait, are ya done with that *already*?! Wow, ya sure work fast, don'tcha?"

"Meooow."

"Yeah, I don't understand your mewings like Master does, so I'm not gettin' what you're sayin'."

Actually, Light didn't understand Aoyuki's catspeak either, but he could read between the lines and tell what she was thinking based on her tone of voice and her body language. Nazuna, on the other hand, was completely clueless when it came to these kinds of social cues. After racking her brain for a bit, Nazuna finally came up with a possible reason for why Aoyuki wasn't out patrolling the forest.

“Ah! Didja come down here for help ’cause there’s a monster in the forest you can’t beat? Lemme handle it! You mighta been summoned before me, but I’m older than ya when it comes to looks and power. Ya can always come to me with your problems!”

Nazuna smiled at Aoyuki, who stood in awkward silence. It was true that Aoyuki had been the second of the Level 9999 warriors Light had summoned—with Mei being the first—but as Nazuna had just pointed out, Aoyuki was often judged as the younger of the two, due to the differences in their heights and chest sizes. When it came to intellectual maturity though... Well, nothing more needed to be said on that score. Aoyuki—who was totally fed up with Nazuna’s rather simpleminded misinterpretations by this point—felt compelled to explain herself by holding up the map she had in her hand and dropping the catspeak.

“No. There are no enemies,” she said brusquely. “The map is partway complete. I’m taking it to Mei.”

“Oh really? Is that all?” Nazuna chuckled, slapping Aoyuki on her back repeatedly. “Ya coulda just said that from the start! You’re so weird, Aoyuki!”

For Aoyuki, the backslaps were rather painful and she couldn’t see what was so funny. Though Aoyuki’s hostility toward Nazuna wasn’t because she hated the Vampire Knight’s guts. After all, while she did find herself questioning whether Nazuna wasn’t too stupid to be part of Light’s inner circle, she fully acknowledged Nazuna’s naturally sunny personality and her deserved reputation as the shining light of the dungeon. No, the two simply didn’t click on a personal level, largely because Aoyuki was catlike, while Nazuna behaved more like a pet dog. Aoyuki was the only one of the two who’d picked up on this incompatibility though.

“Rrowr,” Aoyuki meowed curtly to signal the end of the conversation, then scurried away from Nazuna to get out of her vicinity, in much the same way a cat would.

“Good luck!” Nazuna called after her. Not only was Nazuna completely ignorant about the dissonance between her and Aoyuki, she saw the Genius Monster Tamer as someone who was younger, weaker, and in need of her protection. These kinds of good intentions could definitely be counted as one of

Nazuna's strong points, but they were also the main reason why Aoyuki didn't get along with her.

After shooting the breeze with Aoyuki, Nazuna continued her stroll to the training grounds. The opulent fittings and fixtures of the corridor soon transitioned into the rocky, stalactite-and-stalagmite-filled terrain that had formerly defined the Abyss, as this practice area had been deliberately left undeveloped.

At that moment, a pocket of air in front of Nazuna twisted and stretched unnaturally, until a witch's hat poked out of the floating morass. For the first time that day, Nazuna's face wrinkled in disgust. There was a lot more open space in the training grounds than in other parts of the Abyss, so it served as the primary receiving area for anyone teleporting into the dungeon. That was part of the reason Nazuna chose the training grounds as her go-to destination for her daily walks—or rather, patrols.

"Ack, Ellie!" Nazuna blurted out in mild annoyance. "I thought ya were out inspectin' stuff or constructin' junk or whatever it is ya do."

"Well, if it isn't Nazuna," Ellie said. "I've returned because I've hit my work quota for today, of course. You really are an idiot, Nazuna."

"Who ya callin' an idiot?" Nazuna yelled. Out of the four inner-circle girls, Nazuna and Ellie were summoned the closest together, which probably explained why they teased each other mercilessly every time they ran into one another. Unlike with Aoyuki, Nazuna got along with Ellie well enough that the two of them were able to bicker without any feelings getting hurt, and their constant back-and-forth was a great spectator sport at the bottom of the Abyss.

Ellie needled Nazuna with a piece of news she'd been saving for just such an occasion. "Unlike you, the idiot of the group, I was put in charge of the revenge plot against Sasha, and it's all proceeding so smoothly that just the other day, I had tea with Blessed Lord Light to tell him about the fabulous progress I'd made! What do you think of that, huh? Jealous, are we?"

"Ooh! For real?" Nazuna said excitedly. "Yeah, I'm totally jealous! I wanna have tea with Master too!"

Ellie paused. "Really? That's all you have to say?" she finally asked.

“Huh? What else am I s’posed to say?” Nazuna said, looking confused.

Ellie had fully expected Nazuna to fly into a frustrated rage, giving the Forbidden Witch even more opportunity to poke fun at her shorter counterpart, but instead of that, the Vampire Knight simply admitted she was jealous and moved on. Nazuna’s habit of giving straightforward, candid answers to things occasionally caught Ellie off guard and shut her down, like in this case.

Being who she was, Nazuna was completely oblivious to Ellie’s confusion at her answer, and she moved the conversation along. “I trust ya to finish up with that Sasha revenge plan of yours quick! Ya may be great at magic, but ya ain’t much good at close combat, so if ya need anything, just ask. I got your back!”

“Honestly, you’re unbelievable...” Ellie sighed.

“Huh?”

Nazuna’s innocently genuine offer of support had metaphorically knocked Ellie out for the count, and the Forbidden Witch found herself unable to say another mean word to the smiling vampire. Nazuna tilted her head quizzically to one side and stared at Ellie, who eventually threw up her hands in frustration and left the training grounds to attend to her other jobs.

Nazuna watched Ellie go, her head still tilted in puzzlement—which was a common pose for her—until eventually, she decided to resume her patrol. It wasn’t long until she’d forgotten all about this—at least, to her—odd exchange, because after all, Nazuna would never stop being Nazuna.



Once she’d completed her daily rounds, Nazuna had dinner, took a bath, and jumped into bed. “Another day of protectin’ the Abyss done, just like Master ordered!”

But there was one lingering issue that was peeving her. “I’m so sad I didn’t get to see Master today. D’aw, I love him so *super-duper* much. I miss him. I’d turn all those guys up on the surface world to mush if Master would let me.”

Nazuna was only staying put where she was because Light and the others had insisted on it, but she’d sworn to herself that she would pulverize anyone and everyone who made her master feel miserable.

“I hope I’ll get to see Master tomorrow...” Nazuna whispered, and she soon drifted off to sleep after her long day’s work.

“Good night, Master...”

Extra Story: The Maids Vent

The fairy maids who worked in the Abyss generally shared four to a room, and the cleaning work and other chores were rotated between these teams of four. For one particular foursome, this was their day off, and they had nothing better to do than sit and chat while munching the snacks they'd bought at the dungeon shop. Naturally, the topic of conversation was their master, their lord, their *raison d'être*, their god: Light. Each of the four maids sitting around the table was nursing a sizable lump on her head, after Mei—the head housekeeper—had punished them for tricking Nazuna into going to Light's private chambers to deliver their grievances to her.

“All we did was tell Miss Mei it wasn't fair that *she's* the only one who gets to clean Master's room. What right did she have to get so angry at us over that?” said one of the fairy maids, who was a real beauty, but personality-wise, had nothing about her that made her stand out from the others. “This is as good a reason as any to mutiny.”



“I am in wholehearted agreement,” said a second maid, who looked every bit a prim and proper girl as she pushed up her glasses. “The idea that she would simply monopolize the cleaning of our lord’s room has filled me with rage-envy!”

Sitting next to her was a fairy maid whose looks and mannerisms would be best described as those of an ultra-trendy kogal in high school if this were modern-day Japan, and she had this particularly annoying habit of making practically everything she said sound like a question. She put forward a proposal that would definitely land her in trouble if she chose to act on it. “But y’know, we’re dealing with the head maid here, so we’re, like, outmatched and junk? Y’think maybe we should poison her food?”

“Nuh-uh. N-No way, no way. She’s far too strong for poison to affect her. She’s not Level 9999 for nothing, you know.” The final fairy maid of the four was every bit as pretty as the others, but she’d grown out her bangs and gave off a kind of “moody geek girl” energy. She also seemed like the type of shrinking violet who’d attract similarly awkward boys—the kind who would normally have trouble speaking to girls.

“Then, I guess there’s not a lot us Level 500 nobodies can do about her,” the nondescript beauty sighed. “I’m still insanely jealous of Miss Mei, though. I want to clean Master’s room at least once!”

“I know, right?” said the kogal. “*And* you, like, get to sniff his blanket on the side?”

“I am in wholehearted agreement!” said the prim and proper maid, the light reflecting off the lenses of her glasses as if to emphasize this statement of hers.

“I, uh, I’d like to take Master’s fork after he’s finished eating with it a-a-and secretly lick it!” the geeky maid declared with a salacious grin on her face.

“Pervert!” Nondescript Beauty bawled at her.

But Geeky didn’t hesitate to defend herself—well, if you discount her stutter, that is. “Uh, b-but wouldn’t you guys want to lick Master’s fork if you had it?”

The other three maids all agreed without hesitation.

“Yeah, I’d do it in that case,” Nondescript Beauty piped up.

“I’d indeed lick it,” Prim and Proper confirmed.

“I’d, like, definitely lick it?” Kogal added.

“There. Y-You see?” Geeky said, feeling she’d proved her point.

Kogal suddenly appeared to remember something. “I thought Mei was supposed to have her hands full running the Abyss? So she should totally, like, let us clean Master’s private chambers, yeah? Then again, she *was* the first one he summoned and all that...”

“Yeah, she was, but why bring *that* up?” asked Nondescript Beauty.

“So I heard it took, like, maybe three months or so before Master summoned Aoyuki, right?”

Kogal’s recollection made the other maids audibly gulp.

“Back then, Master was just a naive little boy who hadn’t learned all the things he knows now, and Mei was all alone with him for three whole months while the Abyss was still crawling with deadly monsters,” said Nondescript Beauty.

“Master was still twelve years old in both looks and mental age, and his power level would have been much weaker than ours,” said Prim and Proper. “And Miss Mei was all alone with him...”

“Um, uh, a young boy alone with a young girl in a deadly dungeon...” said Geeky. “Y-You just *know* things must have happened between them.”

A gloomy, practically ear-splitting silence fell over the room.

“I’m now even *more* jealous and envious of our head maid!” Nondescript Beauty cried out.

“She needs to go die in a fire,” said Prim and Proper. “Or rather, we should make her die in a fire.”

“If only our jealousy could curse people? It’d, like, totally destroy Mei?” Kogal added.

“Drop-dead-drop-dead-drop-dead-drop-dead-drop-dead...” Geeky muttered

continuously.

“I find that very unkind of you. Especially when I was about to give you all some good news.”

All four fairy maids jumped at the sound of a fifth voice. They turned as one toward the door, where the subject of their conversation—the Ever-Seeking Maid, Mei—was standing with a chillingly composed look on her face.

“M-Miss Mei!” Nondescript Beauty yelled at her. “You should *knock* before you come in!”

“I did knock, but you were all so engaged in voicing your disapproval of me that none of you noticed,” Mei replied. “Honestly, I thought you would enjoy this piece of news, but I believe I will go share it with the other maids instead.”

“What even, like, *is* this ‘piece of news’ you’re going on about?” asked Kogal.

After a moment’s thought, Mei relented. “Master Light will be returning to the Abyss in a few days. I *had* planned to choose one of you four to be his attendant, but now...”

This prompted a complete one-eighty in the four fairy maids’ attitudes, and each one threw themselves at Mei’s feet.

“I swear my undying loyalty to you, Head Housekeeper Mei!” Prim and Proper declared immediately. “I’m not like these other girls!”

“Uh, I’ve always thought of you as an older sister, a teacher, and a benefactor, M-Miss Mei!” Geeky pleaded.

“Miss Mei, I totally looked up to you since, like, *before* I was even summoned?” said Kogal.

“Miss Mei! Miss Mei! Please treat me like your dog, woof, woof!” Nondescript Beauty insisted.

The sight of the fairy maids slavishly trying to curry favor without any hint of compunction gave Mei an instant headache. “I wonder if I erred in training these maids. Did I fail to live up to my maid’s code?”

Mei continued to reflect on where she’d gone wrong, leaving the room to drown itself in the din of the self-serving pleas to serve Light.

Afterword

Hello, Meikyou Shisui here. I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading and/or purchasing *Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon: My Trusted Companions Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an Unlimited Gacha I Got LVL 9999 Friends and Am Out For Revenge on My Former Party Members and the World*.

This time around, I was honored to be given the opportunity to have *Unlimited Gacha* published by Hobby Japan Novels. My previous light novel series, *Military Nerd*, was released in miniature A6-sized books, but this book is the first of mine to be published in a larger size, meaning there were a number of differences in how I had to approach it, and I received advice from many people in order to finally get this book into a publishable state. I would like to thank everyone who was involved on the publishing side; there are no words that can adequately express my appreciation for you making sure my work was published in good order.

This book is a revised version of the web novel series I submitted to *Shosetsuka ni Naro*, the website operated by HinaProject Inc. This book contains new scenes, new characters, and a host of other elements not found in the original *Naro* version. In that light, I believe those who have already read the *Naro* version will be able to enjoy this book version every bit as much as newcomers to the series.

The new scenes aren't the only things that are noteworthy about this book. What should really draw your attention are the illustrations by tef. Those of you who picked up this book and took a look at the cover—not to mention, the various color and black-and-white illustrations that pepper the book itself—will understand where I'm coming from: tef's illustrations are amazing! Not only is every character drawn in a way that makes them look cute and stylish, the overall composition of the illustrations, the color choices, and the character designs are all so outstanding, I'm awestruck every time I look at them. So to tef, I say thank you for your wonderful illustrations.

Another thing I'd like to address is that a manga version of this story has been green-lit, with the serialization set to begin on Tuesday, May 25, 2021—just a few days after the release of the first volume of this light novel. You can find the manga on Magazine Pocket, the official (and free) manga app of Kodansha's *Shonen Magazine*.

The art for the manga is being drawn by Takashi Ohmae, whose work has previously been published in *Weekly Shonen Magazine*. I've had the honor of reviewing early drafts of the chapters, and I really enjoyed them. Ohmae understood the *Unlimited Gacha* novel deeply and has thoroughly translated my words to the medium of manga in a way that's easy to read and enjoyable. Furthermore, Ohmae has made the characters leap out of the page, full of life. All the movement and visual intensity that couldn't be conveyed as effectively in a purely written medium have been expressed in fine detail in the manga panels he has produced. The manga has successfully expanded the world contained in *Unlimited Gacha*.

So for those of you who have read the *Unlimited Gacha* novel and found it at least somewhat enjoyable, I would greatly appreciate it if you checked out the first chapter of the manga version as well, which will become available on Magazine Pocket on Tuesday, May 25. The app is free to read, by and large, so I believe you should have no trouble accessing the chapter.

Now, I would like to round off with a list of acknowledgments.

I would like to thank tef for the wonderful illustrations. Once again, tef's illustrations are phenomenal, and the characters depicted in them are even better than how I'd originally pictured them in my head. Thank you so, so much. There wasn't a single time where I wasn't amazed by tef's sophisticated design choices as well as the quality of the art, and I can't wait to see more. I look forward to our continued collaboration going forward.

I wish to apologize for all the inconvenience I caused the HJ Novels' editorial team as well as my supervising editor. Because this is my first time working with them, they were gracious enough to give me lots of advice on a wide range of issues. I'm really thankful for all your help.

I wish to thank Takashi Ohmae for creating a manga version of *Unlimited*

Gacha that is high quality and entertaining to me in my capacity as one of hopefully many readers. When I get the draft chapters, I'm supposed to read through them and give notes, but I find myself engrossed in each chapter I receive. I look forward to our ongoing collaboration.

To the Kodansha editorial team, I apologize for bothering you extensively due to this being the first web manga I've been involved in. I believe I may continue to bother you in the future, so I hope we'll have a great working relationship.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the readers who picked up the *Unlimited Gacha* book or read the *Naro* web version. Thanks to everyone's support, this novel found its way to being published and there is even a manga version now. I really can't thank you all enough. For what it's worth, I wish to return the favor by putting my heart and soul into my writing, so I look forward to your continued support.

P.S.: I have written a bonus "what if" story that is available to everyone who purchased this novel. This story features an alternate timeline from the *Naro* version, in which Light decides to lead a "slow life" (or is it?), even though he possesses his Unlimited Gacha powers. To access this bonus story, go to my activity update dated May 19, 2021 on the *Naro* website and follow the instructions in the entry. You will be directed to my personal webpage, where you will need to enter a password.

(My tentative title for this activity update entry is "*Unlimited Gacha: Volume 1 Bonus Story*." For those of you who have never gone to the activity updates on the *Naro* website, you can do a web search for "明鏡シスイ 活動報告 (Meikyou Shisui Activity Update)" and that should take you to the right webpage. Each activity update has a date, so just click on the entry that corresponds to the date I gave above. Also, the password to my personal website changes with every volume of the novel that's released, so please bear that in mind.)

The password for this volume is: **mugen**. [Please note: As of this English-language publication, this password has expired]

✦ Mei ✦

The LVL 9999 maid who swears absolute fealty to Light.

"Master Light...
What a remarkably distinguished name."

✦ Light ✦

A young boy who serves as a baggage carrier for the adventuring party, the Concord of the Tribes. Wields a useless skill, the Infinite Gacha.

Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon:

My Trusted **Companions** Tried to **Kill Me**, But Thanks to the **Gift** of an

UNLIMITED GACHA

I Got

LVL 9999

Friends and Am Out For **Revenge**

on My **Former Party Members**

and the **World**

1
VOL.



—+ Aoyuki +—

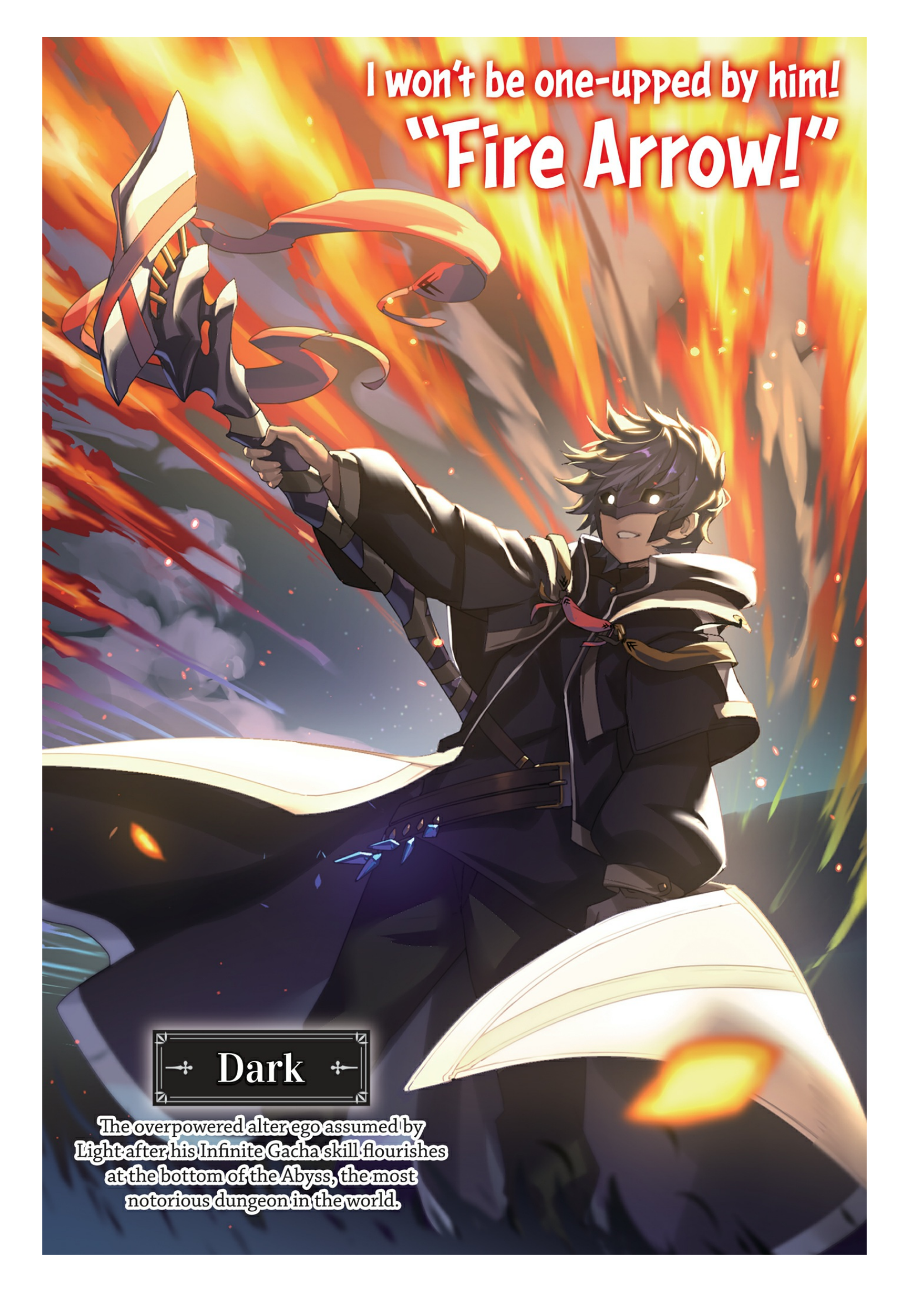
The LVL 9999 monster tamer with a feline personality.

—+ Ellie +—

The LVL 9999 super-witch who banters daily with Nazuna.

—+ Nazuna +—

The LVL 9999 vampire knight who wields a large sword and wears body armor.



I won't be one-upped by him!
"Fire Arrow!"

✦ Dark ✦

The overpowered alter ego assumed by
Light after his Infinite Gacha skill flourishes
at the bottom of the Abyss, the most
notorious dungeon in the world.

Bonus Short Stories

The Dungeon Shop and Dungeon Currency

“So this one’s asking me what to do about the huge number of extra Normal cards we’re getting, huh?”

On this particular day, I was busy doing paperwork in my office at the bottom level of the Abyss. I’d finally conquered the world’s deadliest dungeon and was starting to get my newly-subjugated stronghold in order, but I was still a little way off from being ready to ascend to the surface world to take my revenge. I’d paused briefly in my work to read aloud a memo that had caught my eye.

“Master Light, is something the matter?” asked Mei, who was also doing paperwork at a desk near mine.

“No, it’s not a serious problem, but...” I trailed off because I wasn’t entirely sure how to address the memo.

A surplus of Normal cards didn’t present any real problem to me. Thanks to a trick I’d discovered, the Unlimited Gacha produced cards around the clock, which naturally meant my Gift was spitting out a ton of Normal cards. In order to get rid of the clutter, we organized all of the cards broadly by type and shoved them away in a storehouse. However, by this point, the storehouse was full and the memo I’d picked up was asking whether I wanted to enlarge it so there would be more space for all the cards. It wouldn’t be too much work for me to just expand the storehouse—or alternatively, put any new Normal cards in some other location—but the idea of doing it rubbed me the wrong way.

“They may not be rare cards, but I still think it’s a waste to just hoard them away like this,” I said.

“I see your point. It would be better to make use of those cards instead of storing them away in a warehouse indefinitely,” Mei stated, her exquisitely-shaped eyebrows ever so slightly furrowed. “If we were able to consume those cards, spending time and effort to expand the storehouse would not be

necessary. Yet, how one goes about making efficient use of these Normal cards is a perplexing conundrum indeed.”

“You don’t have to think so hard about it,” I said, chuckling sheepishly. “I have an idea on what we can do, but I’ll need everyone to pitch in. Listen to my idea and tell me if you think it’ll work.”

I proceeded to tell Mei my plans for reducing the overflowing stockpile of Normal cards, and a short while later, I found myself personally witnessing some of the fairy maids giddily doing some shopping at a newly-constructed building in the Abyss.

“I really love this ‘chocolate’ candy!” one said.

“I like the chocolate too,” a second maid agreed. “But this ice cream is so chilly and sweet!”

“And it’s not just snacks here. This place has some nice-smelling soaps and elixirs for washing your hair!”

“Those aren’t elixirs. They’re called ‘shampoo’ and ‘conditioner.’”

My idea for getting rid of the Normal cards was to sell the items in a dungeon shop. The concepts of “stores” and “shopping” didn’t really exist in the Abyss since my gacha cards took care of everybody’s needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, but I figured opening a store that sold surplus Normal cards would be good for recreational purposes. I also commissioned a new currency for the Abyss that got handed out to everyone in the form of regular allowances. The shop I built was staffed by vendors working in shifts, and it ended up being a huge hit with all of my retainers, who snapped up the Normal items in droves. Thanks to their purchases, we were able to reduce the stockpile of low-rarity cards, which meant we didn’t need to spend time adding more storage space to house them all.

So my idea turned out to be a win-win for myself and the residents of the Abyss, but there was one facet about it that I had come to regret.

“Having my face on all of these coins is kind of embarrassing,” I said to Mei as I continued my inspection of the shop.

“A currency is considered the face of the nation,” she replied. “As such, I

decided it was imperative to engrave your profile onto the coins. In any case, the currency has been very well received by all of your subjects.”

Unsure of how to respond to this, I simply smiled and watched the shoppers as they flitted about the store, enjoying this new experience immensely.

“Well, as long as everybody’s happy, I guess.”

The Fairy Maids’ Off-The-Clock Chat

The fairy maids who worked on the bottom level of the Abyss typically shared four to a living quarter, with the work assignments rotating between these teams of four. On this particular day, one of the foursomes was spending their day off in their rooms, sitting around a table and chatting away while munching on snacks they’d bought at the dungeon shop.

“I saw Miss Ellie getting into another catfight with Miss Mei,” remarked a maid who was extremely cute but had nothing else going for her—to the point where it seemed like if you took her looks out of the equation, she’d have practically no personality to speak of.

Another maid who wore glasses sipped some of her tea and offered her thoughts. “Miss Ellie is forever viewing Miss Mei as a romantic rival when it comes to Master Light. Though I admit I understand how she feels.”

“Yeah? But Miss Mei is, like, Master Light’s top choice to be his one true wife or whatever, right? That *would* literally make them rivals?” The third maid—who would have been considered an ultra-trendy kogal if this were Japan—had a habit of phrasing practically everything in the form of a question.

“But, um, M-Miss Mei was the first one Master Light summoned, so well, there’s that,” said the fourth maid, who looked like a cute geek.

“Miss Mei’s super lucky to be so adored by Master Light,” said Supercute as she flopped forward across the table with her arms stretched all the way out in front of her, which was a very unrefined pose for a maid. “If only he’d summoned *me* first instead of Miss Mei...” she sighed. “Then I’d be the one getting all that love and attention.”

“But if we’d been summoned first, we would’ve had to deal with the whole

dark and deadly Abyss as it originally was, yeah?” Kogal pointed out. “And it’d be, like, impossible for us to protect him from all those monsters and junk?”

“N-Now that you mention it, I’m glad Miss Mei was s-summoned first,” said Geeky. “Sh-She was a much better choice for keeping Master safe.”

“Ugh, yes, I *know* we’re only Level 500s, but still...” Supercute protested. Hearing all of these rebuttals had made her feel even worse.

Glasses—who’d been silent throughout this whole exchange—finally came out with a counterpoint. “On the other hand, this is the head maid we are talking about here,” said Glasses. “There *is* a slight chance she might prioritize her position as head maid and personally remove herself from the running to become his official wife, so that she can fully devote herself to housekeeping.”

Her suggestion caused the other three fairy maids to suddenly fall silent as they gave this rather unlikely scenario some serious contemplation.

“There might actually be a possibility of that happening,” said Supercute.

“She *is* such a total head maid and all that?” said Kogal.

“Okay, th-then that would make Miss Ellie the p-presumptive wife, right?” asked Geeky.

A flash of light reflected off the lenses in Glasses’s eyeglasses. “By all rights, Miss Ellie should be the one to fill the role, given her unabashed assertiveness, but I believe Miss Aoyuki would also be a strong contender. She may play the role of Master Light’s pet currently, but if you think about it, that means she is closer to him than Miss Ellie is.”

“If we’re talking about people who are close to Master Light, Miss Nazuna’s really tight with him too,” Supercute pointed out. “Then again, Nazuna’s chummy with just about everyone.”

“Her p-personality is far too dazzling for me to handle,” said Geeky. “But Master sees her as the life and soul of the dungeon, and she’s friendly with everybody, a-aside from a few people.”

Indeed, Nazuna’s sunny personality meant she could get along with basically anyone, but that didn’t mean *everyone* in the Abyss liked her, and there were a

few people even Nazuna had friction with.

Kogal waved away Supercute and Geeky's speculation. "Nazuna's chances of becoming his wife are, like, basically zero? Sure, she's close to Master Light and all, but she's more like his little sister? Him treating her like a woman ain't ever gonna happen, y'know?"

"Yeah, you're right," the rest of them said in unison.

Kogal then tossed out the name of a hitherto overlooked potential dark horse. "If anything, Miss Nemumu would be top of the list to become his wife if Miss Mei excluded herself, yeah?"

"Miss Nemumu? Why her?" asked Supercute, tilting her head to one side in such an endearing way that all the men on the surface world would've immediately fallen for her had they seen it, but as it had zero effect on the other fairy maids, the conversation continued as normal.

"Well, y'know, she's been questing up on the surface world with Master Light and stuff?" Kogal said. "That means she's with him morning, noon, and night, which includes eating, bathing, and sleeping together, yeah? Like, if they have to camp outdoors, that's a young boy and a girl sitting under the stars with a romantic campfire right in front of them? You really think nothing's gonna happen between them?"

Kogal had just spun a scandalously fanciful narrative depicting Light engaging in constant dalliances with Nemumu—a version of events that completely erased Gold from the picture. It was also important to note that Light *insisted* on bathing alone. But these key details didn't matter to the maids.

Kogal's yarn caused Glasses's eyes to narrow. "We should do everything in our power to support Miss Nemumu's marriage to Master Light. If they were indeed to wed, she could bring us into Master Light's orbit," Glasses announced, then paused briefly before continuing. "And dare I say, there is a chance he might end up sharing his love with us."

The other three reacted with shock at this proposition. Although they were supposed to be enjoying a relaxing day off munching on snacks, they promptly lapsed into serious rumination. The four maids all sat with their backs rod-straight, and launched into a discussion about what they were going to do, in

the same way that warlords planned for a decisive battle.

“We should prepare for *anyone* becoming Master’s official wife, not just Miss Nemumu,” Supercute said with a determined look in her eye.

“I totally get you? Like, there are other contenders besides Miss Nemumu anyway, yeah?” Kogal added.

“W-W-We should look closely into all these other girls a-and narrow down who the most likely winner will be!” said Geeky, who had the same unusually grim expression on her face as Kogal. The four fairy maids spent the rest of their day off in an impassioned debate about who was the most likely to end up as Light’s bride.

Nazuna’s Coaching

“Okay! Time to teach ya how to use a spear, Master!” chirped Nazuna.

“Please do, Nazuna,” I said.

My weapons coach—the Level 9999 SUR Ancestral Vampire Knight, Nazuna—was unbelievably skilled in wielding not just swords, but shields, bows, and spears as well. During my time with the Concord of the Tribes, my former party members had taught me a bunch of stuff about weapons, and the weapon I’d become most proficient with was the spear.

When I later found myself trapped at the very bottom of the Abyss with Mei as my only ally, she’d taught me the basics of spear fighting. But in order to exact my revenge on my former partymates, I wanted to become all-conquering, so I’d asked Nazuna to instruct me on the art of combat, since she was the most elite fighter in my domain. Nazuna was elated to find out that I needed her help, and she’d immediately grabbed a practice spear to help me train.

“Master, all ya need to do with a spear is go shwoosh! Pah-Pah! Then, add a little ‘gmph’ to it!” Nazuna said, smiling from ear to ear.

“Um, er, okay?” I said bemusedly.

I was glad Nazuna was so eager to teach me what she knew, but she was the

kind of natural-born fighter who relied primarily on instinct. Unfortunately, that particular quality made her an incredibly lousy teacher.

“Guess ya didn’t quite follow that, huh? Okay, I’ll slow it down for ya! First, ya ‘shwoosh.’ Then, you go ‘pah.’ Then, ya add a little ‘gmph’ at the end, see?”

True to her word, Nazuna broke down the moves and went through them at a slower pace this time, but I still didn’t get what she meant. I spent the next hour patiently running through her lessons, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t make any headway and I ended up raising the white flag.

“Sorry, Nazuna,” I said. “Nothing is clicking.”

Nazuna’s eyes welled up with tears. “It’s not your fault, Master. It’s mine. I’m a horrible teacher.” The normally sunny Vampire Knight paused briefly to choke back a sob. “If I can’t live up to what ya want from me, there ain’t a reason for me to exist, is there?”

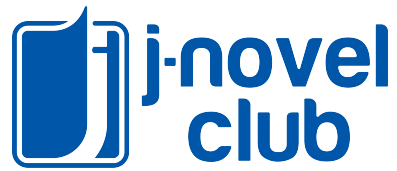
“No, don’t say that!” I said frantically. “I’m very happy you’re here for me!” Seeing that Nazuna was still in a funk despite my protestations, I tried even harder to cheer her up. “The only reason I’m not getting it is because I’m so very, very bad at knowing how to wield a spear! But I won’t give up on learning how to fight with a spear. So could you please keep teaching me?”

“Ya really wanna learn from a useless hack like me?” Nazuna sniffed.

“You are *not* a useless hack! In fact, you’re the cutest, strongest, most heroic fighter I know! Everyone depends on you for everything! So please, I want you to keep teaching me how to fight with a spear!”

“Y-Ya really mean it?” Nazuna mumbled, sniffing back her tears and allowing a smile to appear on her face again. “In that case, I can’t let’cha down, now can I? Not wit’cha countin’ on me and all!”

As I stroked Nazuna’s soft, silky hair in an effort to placate her some more, in my mind, I was tearing my hair out in sheer frustration. I eventually resigned myself to the fact that I would need to carry on learning the basics of wielding a spear from Mei while also figuring out how to put up with Nazuna’s “coaching” methods.



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Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon: My Trusted Companions Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an Unlimited Gacha I Got LVL 9999 Friends and Am Out For Revenge on My Former Party Members and the World: Volume 1

by Meikyou Shisui

Translated by Gad Onyeneho Edited by SMR

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